

SHARKS ARE
CAUGHT AT NIGHT

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FRANÇOIS POLI

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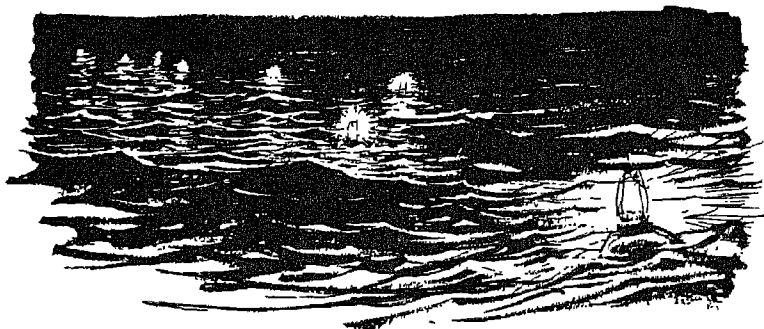
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CHAPTER ONE

MOORED to No. 2 Quay in the port of Corunna, in Spain, the Italian passenger-ship *Auriga* was embarking her complement of emigrants before sailing for the Caribbean. They disappeared into the grey belly of the vessel at the rate of one every ten seconds, and the noise of the engines with steam up was like rumblings in that belly. On the quay, among bundles and dazed children, more than two thousand were waiting to go aboard. They waited in a silence that was somehow dramatic, and had in it something of the tension felt round a gaming-table when stakes are high. And indeed all these people were to stake their very lives in the tropics. As they stepped on to the gang-plank some of them stooped and furtively gathered a pinch of soil from between the paving-stones. Others, already settled between-decks with their mouth-organs, were playing tunes as poignant as a ship leaving port. It was odd to think that fate might already have marked out those who would return with their pockets bulging with dollars. Women were weeping a little, spasmodically, blind and deaf to the lure of the names awaiting them at the end of the voyage: Curaçao, Trinidad, Jamaica, Havana . . . Of all these people, I was the only one who would watch Spain dropping astern without sadness.

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I, too, was sailing for the Caribbean, but not to start a new life. I was going to fish for shark.

It was in Paris the previous summer that I made up my mind to do this, after talking to a friend who had just returned from Havana.

"Over there you find sharks the size of a bus," he told me. "Sharks that can snap a fair-sized tree-trunk in two with one bite—real prehistoric monsters. . . ."

Up to then my fishing-experience had been limited to half a dozen *girelles* and hog-fish which between the ages of twelve and thirty I had managed—quite by accident—to extract from the water. But that didn't matter. Ordinary sea-fishing is to shark-fishing what butterfly-hunting is to hunting tigers, and undaunted I caught the train for Spain and went on board the boat awaiting me there, which was to put two or three thousand miles between me and the winter.

Now I leaned against the rail waiting for the last of the emigrants to come aboard, which he did at eight in the evening. Three hoots from the ship's siren and the *Auriga* moved away from the quay. The crossing was to take seventeen days.

In the course of those seventeen days I saw porpoises, jelly-fish, a freighter and some flying-fish, but not a single shark's fin. We were in sight of Cuba when I stood leaning on the rail for the thousandth time, wondering whether in choosing the winter I had chosen the wrong season. I didn't know then that shark can be fished all the year round and that they seldom appear on the surface. In all my six months of fishing—whether in the Caribbean, in Lake Nicaragua (home of the monstrous fresh-water shark), or in the Pacific—I sighted no more than a score of free-swimming sharks. As a rule they did not show

HAVANA

themselves until we hooked them and, with agonising efforts, hauled them alongside to stun them with clubs.

When the *Auriga* was within a few cable's lengths of Havana, a fishing-boat headed towards us, manned by two half-naked fishermen. As soon as they were near enough to be seen they waved their straw hats in welcome. In the bow of their craft, which was decked for about three feet, a huge shark was lashed. "*Tiburón!*" murmured an old negress who was leaning on the rail beside me. (She was nurse to a flock of Cuban children.) So there were some, then! I surveyed the monster with the eyes of a prospector discovering a nugget, and the *Auriga* entered port with one more light-hearted passenger.

When thinking of Havana I had always pictured a little harbour lined with white and ochre-coloured houses, boats with painted sails, horse-drawn cabs, half-naked negresses reclining on rocking-chairs, and little cafés full of music and scented alcohol. I saw now that the water in the harbour is black, opaque and infested with sharks. Some of the biggest sharks in the Caribbean have been caught there.

William Bolster, an eighteen-year-old American who was spending a vacation in Havana, decided one day to find out for himself whether there were any sharks in the harbour. Arming himself with a long cord ending in a hook the size of his hand, he baited it with a huge piece of meat and cast the improvised line into the water. For half an hour or so nothing happened. Then there was a savage jerk and the line flew out, entangling his legs, and he was dragged with irresistible force into the water.

Two days later one of his cork-soled shoes was found floating at the end of the jetty. It was all that ever was found.

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All the same, sharks are not the most formidable creatures in the port of Havana: they can be avoided. There is no escaping the Cuban customs officers.

Having left the *Auriga* at nine o'clock in the morning, we did not leave the customs sheds until five that afternoon. Meanwhile I made a discovery that was to be confirmed every day during my stay in the tropics: life here moves in a rhythm unknown to us. Work which even a languid Neapolitan would do in a few minutes here requires hours of palavering and apparently great effort. Any attempt to speed things up is useless. I knew an American who had to have treatment for nervous depression because, for the first few months of his stay in these latitudes, he had tried to force the natives into the tempo of New York.

The day after my arrival I walked along the Prado, one of the great thoroughfares of Havana, in the scorching sunshine of a winter morning; I was on my way to meet a friend, Gilles Lambert, who was special correspondent in Central America of a review called *Constellation*. He had arrived in Cuba some weeks earlier, and was following the activities of some treasure-seekers.

The Caribbean islands are the greatest store-house of lost fortunes in the world, in the shape of Spanish galleons that sank in the seventeenth century, precious stones buried by Mexican priests fleeing from persecution, and the like. For some days now Lambert had been moving among rather unnerving characters: "businessmen" armed with heavy revolvers, which attested their membership of the Batista party—Batista the ex-sergeant, who became president of the Cubans—dreamers, and genuine adventurers in tropical kit, as polite and well-turned-out as superior shop-assistants.

EL SUIZO

That day he was accompanied by a character whose appearance—as first beheld in the dimness peculiar to most bars and taverns in Havana—almost froze my blood. He had a huge shaven head, eyebrows like toothbrushes, and no neck. He was a fisherman: the first shark-fisher I ever met.

By repeated whiskies, Lambert had succeeded in luring him from Cojimar (the little harbour near Havana chosen by Hemingway as the scene of *The Old Man and the Sea*) and he had brought him to me by way of welcome. The name of this gorilla was Amos Paredez, but at Cojimar everyone called him El Suizo. The reason for this, he told us, was a grim incident four years before, when he had half-killed a Swiss agent for refrigerators whom he had taken to sea and who afterwards refused to pay what he owed. But of course, he added, all that was pure invention. El Suizo was no money-grubber: was he not willing to take us out to sea with him for nothing, and as often as we liked? He began to laugh, and in laughing revealed his last two remaining teeth. "Just give me a whisky," he said, "for every shark we catch." We arranged to meet on the following day.

In the tropics, life begins at dawn. At that hour the shoeshine boys who line the Havana pavements at intervals of a hundred yards open their boxes; and café waiters—who for a cent serve tiny cups of the best coffee in the world—raise the awnings along the terraces, before the sun has begun to pour its molten nickel over the sea. And at that hour we took the ferry across the harbour. A bus was waiting for us on the other side, and it chugged away with us along a zigzag road lined with flamboyants.

In an hour we came in sight of Cojimar: a fishing-village marked with the sadness of a thousand years. It

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consists of a single street of low houses framed by moth-eaten gardens, and an embankment heaped with *débris* along which ramshackle wooden cabins cling like flies to a wound. Brightly painted boats. No hotel.

Most of the inhabitants work in Havana. The poorest are fishermen. They put out to sea at eleven at night and return at daybreak with a shark or a swordfish—sometimes two, seldom three—lashed in the bows. The fish are butchered at once, amid an appalling stench of slaughter-house, on the sand at the edge of the water, which on good days is dyed by the blood for a stretch of thirty yards.

A nearby factory exploits the produce of the fishing. From the skin of the shark leather is made, and the flesh is sold in the market, at a lower rate than that of the swordfish. The swordfish is more difficult to catch than the shark, being more of a fighter, and it is called here the "emperor fish." Shark's liver yields oil, while the entrails provide bait for the next day. The fishermen receive only a few dollars for all this, and there are many nights when they never get a bite at all.

El Suizo told us these things as we alighted from the bus and walked across the sand to an empty shack, which a fisherman agreed to rent to us for ten dollars a week. It was built of planks like the rest, and its entire furniture consisted of one chair and two iron beds. Ropes and nets hung on the walls, and in one corner there was one of the enormous gaffs used to haul the sharks aboard. There were no sheets, no water, and no light but that of a wick floating in a cup of oil, and the air smelt of damp and fever. But this was all as it should have been.

At ten o'clock that night El Suizo was awaiting us at the end of a little jetty, together with another local man, Romilio. His boat was rocking in the warm evening air;

TWO FINGERS MISSING

the sea was calm, without a breath of wind, and in an hour we should be able to start.

I looked at the craft, which was exactly like most of the others used at Cojimar for shark-fishing at night. She was about fifteen feet long with a three-foot deck forward. Four men could move about in her with ease.

Romilio was a wiry, silent little man. He wore a curious square red beret which gave him the look of a cardinal. Two fingers of his right hand were missing, and a deep scar ran from wrist to elbow. Two years earlier, when he had brought a shark alongside, clubbed it, and was beginning to haul it aboard, the fish turned and with a final effort tore away half his forearm.

"Sharks aren't hard to kill," Romilio explained to me, "and this was quite a little one. The hook was right down in his stomach. But it's after you're sure they're dead that you've got to start being careful."

El tiburón is a carrion-eater, and the wounds it makes very quickly become infected. If Romilio had delayed his return to port by a few hours he would have had to lose half his arm.

I was to find later that many shark-fishers are similarly maimed. Alvarez, another Cojimar man, had his hand pierced one night by the bill of a swordfish. He had hauled the great creature within a few yards of the boat when it broke free. For some seconds it remained motionless on the surface of the water. Alvarez was leaning over the side and hauling in the line when an astonishing thing happened: instead of vanishing at once into the depths, as these fish usually do when they get off the hook, the swordfish attacked the boat. And Alvarez' hand, braced against the hull a few inches below the gunwale, received the thrust.

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Such incidents are fairly common. A case is known of men being attacked in the middle of the night by five or six swordfish at once, and at Cojimar one of these creatures pierced the hull of a boat in its struggles, after being brought alongside with a hook tearing its stomach.

Romilio started the engine and we headed out to sea at half speed. A few minutes before we reached the fishing-grounds El Suizo began preparing the lines. These are of finger-thickness and end in a trace or leader of steel cable, to which is attached a hook the size of a man's hand. The bait consists of a fish or part of the entrails of a shark or a swordfish, firmly lashed round the hook. Each line, suspended from a white wooden float carrying a hurricane-lamp, is run out to a depth of fifty fathoms or so. Half a dozen of these lines hang from each float.

When we reached our mark, Romilio reduced speed even more and our ten floats were dropped one by one overboard. They were linked together at intervals of about sixty feet, and the area we were to fish was about a hundred yards square. There was a long swell; Cojimar had disappeared, and it was the lights of Havana that now marked our horizon. We kept about a hundred yards away from the floats, and the hurricane-lamps appearing and disappearing in the troughs looked like winking eyes resting on the sea. The tropical stars, curiously brilliant and close, were reflected in the water. We sat still and silent in the bottom of the boat, and every ten seconds Romilio directed the beam of a powerful searchlight on to each float. We were waiting for one of the lamps to dip, for this would mean that somewhere in the black depths a big fish was having an argument with a hook. Then all we would have to do was to make for the sunken lantern

THE SHARK TAKES THE BAIT

and haul on the line. We waited for two hours, and nothing happened. The boat switchbacked on the swell. Lambert held his Rolleiflex camera at the ready and Romilio leaned over the water holding a very ripe swordfish head at arm's length; he kept tapping it with a club, to attract the sharks by the resulting flow of blood and rotting flesh. And still the beam of the searchlight played over an unchanging scene.

Romilio put the decaying head back into a bucket. El Suizo uncorked the whisky. Lambert swallowed another dramamine capsule. We went on fishing. . . .

Another hour dragged by. Then suddenly, quite near the boat, something slid by a few feet beneath the surface: a dense trail of tiny stars. El Suizo gave a grunt of satisfaction, for the trail meant that our night would not be wasted. It was caused by a passing shark or marlin, disturbing in its course the tiny phosphorescent creatures of these tropical waters. When a fisherman sees this luminous track a thrill runs through him, for he knows that the giant lurking among his lines will take the bait.

And that is what happened. Ten seconds afterwards, one of the lamps suddenly dived. Romilio bent over the float, felt the six lines that were tied to it, and seized one. And now, by a series of pulls, he struck. The fish had had time to swallow the hook, and this must now be driven firmly into the wall of the stomach.

Romilio hauled, raising the monster inch by inch. I watched the muscles of his forearm: they stood out like cords with the effort. The catch must be a huge one. But when it appeared at the surface in a smother of phosphorescent foam I saw that it was a shark hardly more than three feet long.

"Just a little chap," said El Suizo, when we had made it

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fast in the bows. It hadn't fought. The fiercer ones will tow a boat along for hundreds of yards, sometimes even snatching the fisherman overboard by a sharp jerk of the line.

It was two o'clock in the morning and the night had suddenly turned cool. El Suizo handed out blankets in which we rolled ourselves, and Romilio lay down for a short nap.

He had not yet fallen asleep when two of the lamps went down at once. In a split second he was up and starting the engine, and our craft leaped over the waves.

This time the attack was more serious. One of the lamps had been dragged some fathoms below the surface. The two men each grasped a line and braced themselves against the side of the boat. While Romilio brought a six-foot shark to the surface, stunned it, and got it aboard, El Suizo managed to haul in only a few yards of his line. At the other end of it the great fish was struggling with tremendous force. El Suizo recovered a yard or two, but was forced to relinquish it almost at once, and the beast carried the hook down into the depths.

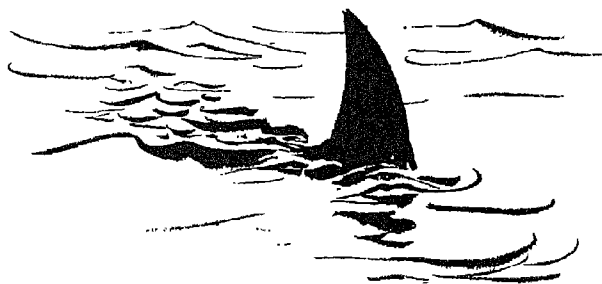
From time to time the man held the line quite still. The fish refused to be hauled up and El Suizo refused to give him any more. Each of them remained as they were, linked by a cord that vibrated on the sea at breaking-point. At that moment any abrupt tug on the line would have been enough to snap it. But the fish was tiring, and after a quarter of an hour El Suizo knew that he had won, and that the fish no longer had the strength to resist the force that was steadily pulling it to the surface.

Every yard gained demanded El Suizo's utmost efforts; his face was distorted and drops of sweat slid down his cheeks—but he had done it. The line dropped ever more

PLAYING THE FISH

quickly into the bottom of the boat, and now within ten feet of us a dark shape loomed up in a trough of the sea: the motionless and seemingly lifeless form of a shark. One final heave and the dark mass broke surface. I bent over to watch more closely, but Romilio snatched me back. The shark had begun to struggle, belabouring the black water in a last effort to get free, and splashing us with spray. The hook had caught at the corner of the jaws and not in the stomach, which explained why the fish had taken so long to tire. It opened its huge jaws and shut them again with the sound of a bat on wet linen, and turned over, rolling round itself the last yards of the line.

El Suizo waited until the fiercest struggles had ceased, and then drew the shark alongside. Romilio had grasped a big club, which he brought down repeatedly on its head. Then he stabbed the creature with a pointed iron bar. The tussle was over. El Suizo sat down, the line still in his hands, and looked at me. There was no mistaking the silent question in his eyes: I picked up the bottle of whisky and handed it to him.



CHAPTER TWO

ON evenings when we didn't put to sea ourselves, we went from café to café in Cojimar, chatting with the fishermen. Sometimes we watched them angling from the end of a little wooden jetty, where they hoped to catch five- or six-pounders. They would cast a line baited with a sardine just at their feet—and suddenly, with a sharp jerk, all their tackle—hook, line, lead, and sardine—would vanish into the depths. Then they rose and began cursing quietly, shaking their fists at those stinking sharks that had run off with a dollar's worth of nylon. For on some evenings sharks came in and lurked within ten yards of the shore. Not far from the village was a rock that overhung a hole more than fifty fathoms deep, where the sea was always green and thick. This, the fishermen declared, was the haunt of the biggest sharks near Cojimar.

In 1945 some children were playing on this rock when one of them slipped and fell. A sudden swirl, and the sea was dyed with blood. "The thought of his child being torn to pieces by the shark was too much for the father," El Suizo said, "and he went out of his mind." For weeks he wandered through Cojimar, wild-eyed, living on what the other men gave him. He had given up fishing alto-

MR WAY'S OLD MAN

gether. Sometimes at night he would go and sit on the fatal rock and stay there for hours. "One night the silence was broken by the sound of explosions. Someone went to see what was happening, and found the wretched man throwing sticks of dynamite into the sea at the place where his boy had disappeared. Soon afterwards he vanished from Cojimar. Did he throw himself into that pool? We don't know. He was never seen again. But nobody has fished there since."

It was on one of those evenings in Cojimar that we met Miguel Ramirez. Ramirez claims to be the original of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. "That marlin-hunt Mr Way talks about," he said (for that is what he calls the author), "that happened to me. Mr Way knows me well. I've often told him about my life." And there is indeed a striking physical resemblance between Ramirez and Hemingway's fisherman.

When we first saw Ramirez he was sitting alone at a table a few yards from ours, emptying glass after glass, his faded blue eyes lost in dreams. What did he do with all the liquid he was swallowing? It was a mystery, for the little old man's body seemed too desiccated to contain an atom of moisture. The skin of his cheeks and neck was like the baked, cracked mud of a sun-dried puddle. He fought shy of us at first because he took us for *gringos* (Americans), and his acquaintance with Mr Way had left him with only luke-warm feelings towards them.

"The first time I saw him," he told us, "I was after small fish, some miles off shore. A boat came along with Mr Way on board; he had a camera and wanted to take my photograph. Afterwards we went to the café. We drank a bottle of whisky and Mr Way made me talk for

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hours. Later we met again and I talked some more. I told him about going after that fish and he put it in his book, and he promised to buy me a new boat and some clothes."

Ramirez owned a shack on the beach at Cojimar, some yards from the one we had rented. It was no less dreary and dilapidated than all the others in the row. On opening the door we walked straight into Hemingway's book: nets hung on the walls, and on the floor was the heap of newspapers on which the old man slept.

Like most of the inhabitants of Cojimar, Ramirez lived on a few dollars a week. He possessed a real house in the village, he told me, but it was his family—about a dozen sons and grandsons—who lived in it. He preferred to sleep by the sea between his four plank walls, close to the sand that smelt of the tide, where the shouts of returning fishermen woke him every morning at daybreak. For he himself no longer fished; he was sixty-seven, and he earned his living by looking after and repairing other men's boats.

Once we had won his confidence he wouldn't leave us. Perhaps he hoped that we would buy him a boat. The fact that we were French had nothing to do with this sudden attachment: he didn't even know where France was. In this he resembled most Cubans, who—apart from those in the towns—would often stop us to ask what language we were speaking. When we told them it was French they said, "Ah, I see," but were evidently none the wiser.

Every morning Ramirez pushed open the door of our shack to bring us news of the night's fishing. Romilio had had no luck. El Suizo was still dead drunk after celebrating the catch of a 500-lb swordfish. And so on. One

PORTUONDO IS AFRAID

day we came upon Ramirez on the beach talking to another fisherman named Portuondo, who with much gesticulation was pointing out to sea. A queer thing had happened.

When Portuondo was on his way back to harbour at dawn he had spotted one of the biggest sharks ever seen off Cojimar twisting and turning only three feet below the surface. Sharks hardly ever showed themselves at that hour or in that place, and Portuondo had been caught unawares. His lines were coiled down on the bottom of the boat, but the shark instead of speeding away was inquisitive, and came within three feet of him, so he had time to uncoil one of the lines and cast it. And it was then that the strange part began.

Instead of dashing ravenously at the bait, the shark began quietly moving round and round the hook without touching it. Then gliding beneath the boat it struck her with such violence that Portuondo was thrown off balance, and very nearly fell overboard. When he got to his feet again the shark was floating motionless six feet away, its huge tail very slightly stirring.

Portuondo threw out a second line, but with no better success. The shark opened and closed its menacing jaws and began once more revolving round the craft.

"For all its size—it looked about twelve feet long—I knew there was no danger," Portuondo told Ramirez. "No shark could capsize my boat. All the same, I was suddenly scared. There was something devilish in those tiny, cold eyes—they seemed to be sneering at me. I started up the engine and came away."

All that day the people of Cojimar talked of nothing but Portuondo's shark. Portuondo had behaved like a rabbit. A fish of that size would have fetched thirty dollars or so.



If it gave itself up like that at daybreak—when the water is as clear as crystal and there is no sun-glare to dazzle one's eyes—the fellow should have got it aboard by no matter what means. Every craft is equipped with one or two sharpened iron bars to finish off any fish that survives the clubbing, and one of these well aimed might have been enough to give the great beast a mortal wound. Instead the man had started up his engine! Within a few hours Portuondo fell considerably in the esteem of his colleagues.

That might have been the end of the story. But some

THE BODY OF A CHILD

days later in the same place another fisherman saw a shark like the one Portuondo had described. He, too, tried to catch it. Then he tried to harpoon it. In vain. The weapon missed the head by a few inches and went to the bottom. The fish never even stirred. During the following week it was seen three or four times, but all attempts to catch it met with failure. On their return from the night's fishing, the men took to cruising for a few hours in the area where the shark usually appeared—the shark that refused to take a bait, the elusive and disdainful shark. It became a question of pride. At last one Sunday—a day usually devoted to cards in the harbour cafés—about fifteen men put to sea at the same time and cast about a hundred lines. The place was too near the shore for them to hope for a good catch, yet six fish took the bait. The largest of them must have weighed over 750 pounds. Portuondo said he recognised it. But one shark is much like another; was it really the same? They decided it was, and when it had been brought ashore the whole village turned out to look at it. The factory was closed on Sundays, and the shark could not be butchered until the following day. It was Alvarez who plunged the long flensing-knife into the body behind the head; he made a deep cut, pulled apart the edges of the wound, and stood up abruptly: the stomach of the beast contained unexpected prey—human prey. The body of a child.

From then on it was a matter for the police. An officer from Havana arrived the same day accompanied by a police-surgeon. The problem of establishing the exact date of death from the state of a corpse discovered inside a shark cannot often have been presented to a police-surgeon—even a Cuban one. Bending with some distaste over the quite recognisable body—the child seemed to

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have been two or three months old—he pronounced death to have occurred within the last twenty-four hours. Foul play? Accident? Almost certainly foul play, for it was hard to see how a baby could have fallen into the sea all by itself. But the criminal was never found. The only positive result of the investigation was that Cojimar emerged for a few days from its drabness and sadness, and figured in the headlines.

It was not the first time that a shark had made news. At Santiago de Cuba, some years earlier, the police arrested a man who had disposed of a corpse by throwing it to the sharks. At first sight it seems a pretty ordinary sort of incident. It is natural enough that criminals of the Caribbean islands, when encumbered by a victim, should think of sharks as a means of disposal rather than quicklime or furnace.

The unusual feature of the Santiago case was the care taken by the criminal, Luis Aminez, to ensure success. He had decided to remove an inconvenient associate. The killing was no problem. The body? He would throw it to the sharks. But he had to make sure that the sharks would turn up at the rendezvous. Aminez had a house near the harbour, with a terrace built out over the water like a sort of jetty on piles; and from this jetty, every day for a fortnight, he threw rotten meat into the water. News of a dinner being served every night at a certain place and time travels quickly in the shark world. Soon two or three of the big fish were coming regularly to lurk between the piles, and all Aminez had to do then was to tip in their final banquet.

Aminéz would never have fallen under suspicion had he not been seized with remorse. He gave himself up one day, and recounted the details of his crime.

SQUALOR AT COJIMAR

Portuondo's shark marked the end of our third week at Cojimar. We had long been familiar figures there, and the day came when whisky cost us only thirty centavos a glass; this meant that the locals had ceased to look upon us as Americans. The miserable beds on which we lay and our apparent lack of disgust at our cramped and meagre quarters no doubt had something to do with this sudden mark of consideration. The bed was nothing; it put me in good training for Nicaragua, where I was to sleep on boards, wrapped in flags like a body on a battlefield. But the meals were really ghastly. We ate swordfish, shark, platefuls of stringy tropical vegetables, especially *yuca*, in which Cubans revel both in the towns and in the bush, and which tastes remarkably like the corrugated paper that separates biscuits in a biscuit-tin. Our meat we shared with the flies, for it was exposed all day long, ready roasted, on the stalls of the Cojimar "food-shops" before being served to us. Most of these shops were simply wooden huts where not only food was sold, but also knick-knacks, Cuban cigarettes made of black tobacco and sweetened paper, playing-cards, and socks. As the cooking was done there too, everything in the place was covered with a film of grease and smoke, amid a permanent smell of cold hash.

When bad weather prevented us from putting to sea we played poker with the fishermen. Sometimes they had no money, and then they staked their future catches: shark by the kilogram for the smaller stakes: swordfish, being rated higher, for the larger ones. The players noted their debts on grimy little bits of paper, and these looked more like housewives' shopping-lists than anything else.

It was on one of these evenings that we were first told about Luis Zeglo. He was a fisherman aged thirty-one.

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A nervous twitch that made his nose quiver every time he had a good hand had won him the nickname of the Rabbit. One night when he had a run of bad luck he mortgaged half his boat and half his lines. It turned out to be the best thing he ever did for himself.

Argudin, the partner that chance had brought aboard Zeglo's boat, the *Lucia*, soon began specialising in *dorao*: a small fish weighing only a few pounds. He went out at dawn and sold his catch at the Cojimar market.

With Zeglo fishing for shark at night and Argudin for *dorao* by day, the *Lucia* partnership proved very profitable. One day Argudin returned to port in a state of unusual excitement. A few cable's-lengths off shore he had discovered the wreck of a small yacht, which had foundered some months before during a tornado, and now lay less than seven fathoms below the surface. The two partners went to Havana and brought back a diver and a representative of the Batista government. (According to the law of the sea, a wreck belongs to the person who first takes possession of it. In Cuba the government claims one-third of the treasure, of which it also acts as valuer. Hence the presence of the Batista man.)

The diver went down, protected from sharks by a metal cage, and for a fortnight he brought up the wreck piece by piece from the sea bed. The value of all that was recovered was estimated at something over six thousand dollars. The most important thing discovered by the diver was a collection of jewellery, in the drawer of a desk; that alone was worth four or five thousand dollars. Some months later, Zeglo and Argudin gave up fishing for good and settled in Varadero, the Deauville of Cuba, where they afterwards bought themselves very fine houses. They accounted for the purchases by saying that they had won large sums at cards.

INSECTICIDE FOR SHARKS

But the fishermen of Cojimar had another explanation for this sudden wealth: Argudin and the Rabbit, they said, had visited the wreck before the diver got there.

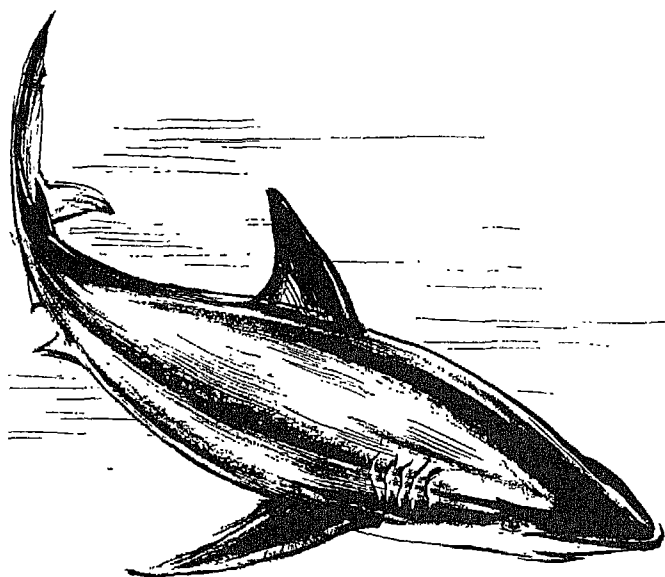
That was one of the stories told by the gamblers of Cojimar, after a poker game. There were others no less wonderful. Some years before the war, Romilio told us—Romilio was the fellow with the square red beret that made him look like a cardinal—Patsy Burt, an American skin-diver, landed at Cojimar to film sharks. A Californian advertising firm had given him the job of shooting a few feet of film, to be used in launching a new insecticide.

Why sharks? This singular notion came from the commercial manager of the advertising firm. Burt was to film a large shark making an abrupt turn. When projected, this sequence was to be accompanied on the screen by a box of the insecticide, with the caption "Even sharks recoil at the sight of X," or something to that effect.

The scene could quite well have been shot in an aquarium; it was Burt who insisted on coming to Cuba, so as to gain an opportunity of indulging in his favourite sport: namely diving in amongst monsters, of which one had already torn off half his foot. The operation presented no serious difficulties. Burt had turned sharks to the right-about in front of his camera a hundred times before, without even having to resort to the trick used by most skin-divers with success—so they say: that is, to scare the creatures off by shouting at them under water.

"Sharks are used to seeing everything run away from them," Burt said. "If you've got the nerve to swim straight at them they make off at once."

"He also told me that sharks only rarely attack," Romilio added. "I told him that people who are attacked never come back to tell the tale."

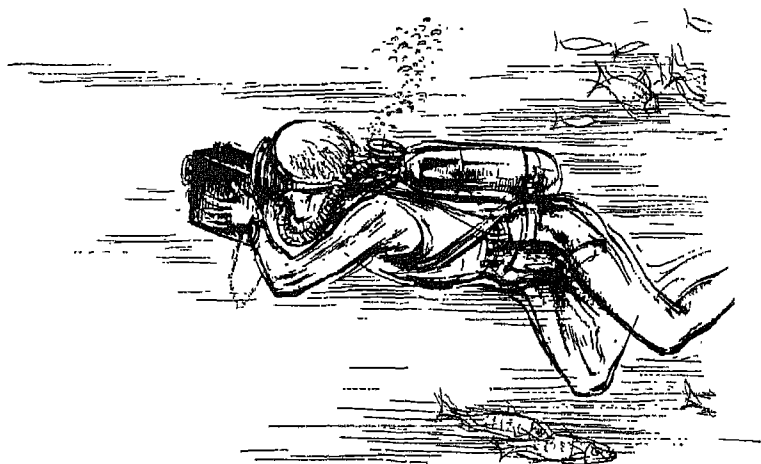


"He landed at Cojimar with his wife. She was very pretty, but horribly spoilt. He had rented a house by the harbour—a real house built of stone, with curtains in the windows—but it wasn't good enough for her, and she went to a hotel in Havana. She came to see him twice a week, obviously to get money out of him.

"Burt used to come out with me. We made for a place where the water was clear, and there he tossed in chunks of meat to attract the sharks. Then he dived in with his camera and breathing-apparatus. I crossed myself every time. He was a tall, thin fellow, with a long, hooked nose and almost no hair, and his head was always queerly tilted over the right shoulder. He went on diving for about ten days, and then one morning he went out alone, by his own wish; when evening came he hadn't returned. We went out to look for him that night, and found the boat that he had hired, adrift. No Burt in sight. We felt we ought to have been looking for him inside the sharks.

PATSY GETS RID OF HIS WIFE

"When his wife heard the news she never said a word. She paid what she owed in Havana and sailed for the United States. I didn't hear the end of the story until a year later," Romilio concluded. "I was walking along a street in Havana when my eyes were drawn to a figure in the crowd ahead of me. Where had I seen him? I went nearer, and it was like being hit between the eyes. Patsy Burt was before me in the flesh, as much alive as you or I. He made no bones about recognising me and telling me why he had disappeared—for the disappearance was voluntary. He had never been attacked at all. When I left him I thought of something he had once said when he was with me in my boat, after one of his wife's visits: 'Romilio,' he said, 'what would you do if a woman made your life impossible?' I answered, 'I'd throw her to the sharks.' It was just a joke, but it seems to me now that he looked at me with a queer smile; perhaps he had already decided upon another way—almost as final and certainly less fatal—of becoming single and happy again."



SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

Among all the sea-monsters of the Caribbean, one in particular put the fear of God into the fishermen of Cojimar: the manta ray or giant ray, which often attains a width of thirty feet and may weigh a ton. A manta ray can capsize a big boat, but that was not the only reason it was feared. This enormous creature was regarded with a sort of superstitious terror, which was inspired partly by its appearance. With its fins extended this ray looks like a monstrous black butterfly—a spectre from the deep. It seemed less to swim than to fly under water.

“If one of them attacks you,” the fishermen said, “you’ve hardly the ghost of a chance of seeing land again. It won’t just overturn your craft—it’ll drag you down with it and let you fight the sharks—that is if it hasn’t already broken all your bones.”

Tales about this fish were handed down from generation to generation, like ghost stories. Four or five men were confronted by a ray one day, including Ramirez, Hemingway’s Old Man. They felt oddly hypnotised, they said, when the creature rose to the surface and looked at them. They attributed to it the power said by the ancients to be possessed by Medusa, one of the three Gorgons of mythology, who could turn to stone anyone who looked her in the face. Yet none of these men had ever been attacked by a manta ray.

There was, of course, no question of catching such a brute. To deal with it effectively one would have needed a harpoon-gun, like those used by whalers. When the fishermen set out their lines they used to pray heaven that no ray would dash at the bait, for this would have meant, at best, the loss of many hundreds of feet of line.

I never saw a manta ray—until that December evening when El Suizo opened the door of our shack.

PERFECT WEATHER FOR SWORDFISH

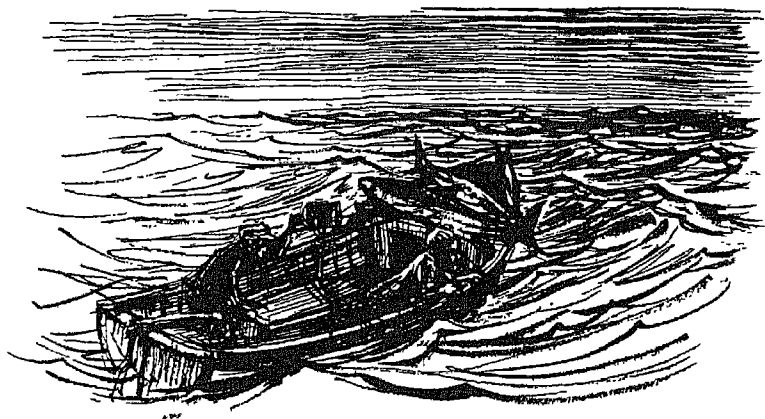
It had been a scorching day. At nightfall a warm wind had risen; it was now driving greyish clouds into the sky and topping the rollers with ripples of foam. El Suizo was carrying his usual bottle of whisky and a Thermos of scalding coffee and milk.

"I'm leaving in an hour, on my own," he said. "Would you care to come along? I don't think the sea will get any rougher. The weather's perfect for swordfish."

Boats were being got ready all along the bay. Others, with all lights extinguished, were already cruising out to sea at half speed. They were soon lost in the darkness, and only a lengthening white wake showed their course. We took two hours to reach our fishing-grounds, for tonight we were to work a long way out.

When El Suizo set out his lines I felt as if we were utterly alone on the sea. The beam from the Havana lighthouse could still be seen, and more lights shone here and there against the darkness; but the other fishing-boats, whose position on most evenings was betrayed by the glare of their searchlights, now seemed to have been swallowed up by the night, like the coast itself. The swell was so heavy that it was impossible to stand up in the boat for more than a few seconds at a time, and the hurricane-lamps on the floats could be glimpsed only at long intervals. Now and again one of them would suddenly vanish, but when we made for the floats at full speed, thinking we had a bite, we would find that the flickering flame had merely been swamped by a big roller.

The sea was growing rougher. El Suizo uncoiled a thin safety-line and made himself fast to the boat, like Captain Kidd when overtaken by the gale; then he waited, indifferent, it seemed, to the violent tossing of the craft and its possible effect on myself.



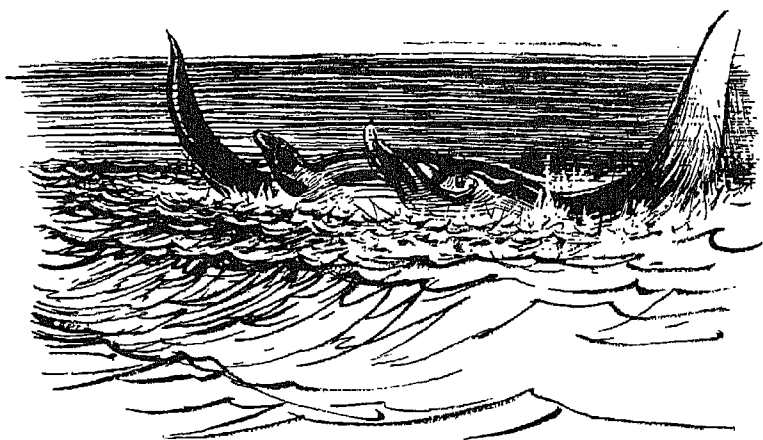
"If the sharks got me it wouldn't spoil *your* sleep," I remarked.

"You're not doing the fishing," he retorted. "Hang on to the boat. It's different for me; I can't land a swordfish and struggle to keep my balance at the same time."

I unhooked a line and made myself fast, as he had. And waited. And I began to long for the land, for the little cafés of Cojimar, and for my very hard but quite motionless bed. It took the constitution of that alcohol-soaked, prehistoric type El Suizo to stand this roller-coaster treatment. I swallowed a glass of whisky and the iron hand that had begun to squeeze my stomach relaxed a little—a very little. Taking the searchlight from El Suizo's hands, I focused it on the floats. The engine was ticking over. We were now in the middle of a big half-circle formed by the hurricane-lamps—I counted one, two, four . . . when suddenly El Suizo, reacting more quickly than I did, snatched the searchlight and aimed its beam at the two nearest floats.

"*Mira, mira!* (look!)" he cried.

Both lamps seemed in the grip of a violent St Vitus'



Dance. In ten seconds we were up to them, and the next moment we were each holding a line with a fish weighing several hundred pounds on the end of it. It was the first time I had felt the strength of a creature of that weight. It was like having a frantic horse on a rope. The first struggles of a big fish that has just swallowed the hook, though deadened by the mass of water between it and you, are so enormously powerful that for the moment you have no hope of bringing it an inch nearer. You have to "give it rope," and at the right moment, or else, under the strain of a sudden pull, you get two sharp blows on the biceps. The line you thought you held in a firm grasp slips through your hands, scoring the palms; once more you grasp it and once more it slips. Your hands, arms, shoulders, and the small of your back hurt abominably. And this is only the beginning. If you should have made the mistake of taking a turn of the line round your wrist, you're in danger of a serious sprain, or a dive, or both; the fish that can tow a boat for hundreds of yards can also pull you out of it as easily as gas pops a cork from a bottle.

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

All at once the tugging ceases. The fish is recuperating. And now is the time to haul in, very quickly, for in a few seconds it will be fighting again. Yard by yard you drag the dead weight from the depths. Another tussle, then a respite—a tussle . . . The rearing and bucking grows ever feebler. Fathoms of dripping line coil down behind you—and now the giant is about to break surface.

This is perhaps the most exciting moment of all, for now you're to see what it is you're dealing with. Shark? Tuna? Marlin? Barracuda? A big one? A small one? Not until this instant can these questions be answered. A shark may fight like a swordfish. A 600-pounder may give less trouble than a 300-pounder. It depends upon where the hook has caught it.

Breaking surface, the fish has gathered the remnants of its strength for a last fight. These despairing struggles are sometimes the most violent. (A swordfish may leap five or ten feet into the air.) Another few seconds, and you draw your catch alongside. Not a quiver. It is just a little more tired than you are.

Between the first tossing of the lamps and getting my shark within three feet of the boat, more than thirty minutes had elapsed; to me they had seemed an eternity.

"You'll get your next one in half the time," said El Suizo, who had taken only seven minutes to land his own, "and be only half as tired. You'll learn to haul at the right moment, and at no other."

He sat down in the bottom of the boat and looked at the sky, over which heavy black clouds were still passing. His forecast had been accurate: the wind was dropping, and it was no more than a warm, scented breeze that now dried our drenched shirts.

Leaning on the gunwale, I watched El Suizo putting

THE MANTA RAY

fresh bait on the two lines and throwing them into the water. I was incapable of the least movement, and my aching arms seemed no longer to belong to me.

A broad ribbon of black blood was running from the mouth of one of the two sharks lashed in the bows. I lay down with my head on some ropes, for a nap.

When I woke the wind had dropped entirely. Slouched in a corner, half-asleep too, El Suizo moved the searchlight beam over the water.

"Good weather for swordfish," he murmured. "Only there aren't any. . . ."

He consoled himself by putting his bottle of whisky ever more frequently to his huge lips; and from the amount by which the level had dropped I realised I must have slept for rather more than an hour.

"I'll have a snooze too," he added, handing me the searchlight. "Wake me next time we get a bite. . . ."

But we never did. What happened was something quite different.

Thirty or forty yards away, a slight disturbance appeared on the surface of the water—a sort of slow eddy due neither to the wind nor to the swell—and something broke surface. An unknown, black, enormous thing. El Suizo had not had time to fall asleep. Kneeling in the boat, his hands gripping the rail, he stared intently, like me, at what had appeared in the band of light cast by the projector.

"Put it out quick!" he whispered.

As I did so, two wings as wide as sails detached themselves from the black mass and beat the water with a fury that raised eddies of foam. El Suizo's face, normally an unattractive sight, was strangely relaxed by fear. He smiled, he became human; it was his way of showing

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

panic. He looked at me with this fixed smile and babbled "*raya manta . . . the giant ray . . .*" What do people think about when in the grip of fear? I thought of nothing at all—not even of the attack which might be launched at any moment, if what the Cojimar fishermen said was true. I hadn't even the traditional chilly sensation down my spine. I simply felt as if an ounce weight had been dropped on each separate cell of my body. I was enveloped in a coating of lead which forbade all action but that of gazing fixedly at the monster now slapping the water thirty yards away.

The great wings ceased beating, and the fish turned about with the deliberation of a slow-motion film. It went on turning for some seconds and sank into the sea, where it paused six feet or so beneath the surface. It must have continued its strange rotation under water, because for seconds afterwards the sea was troubled at the point where the fish had gone down; then it grew calm. The whole scene had lasted no longer than a minute.

We stayed motionless for some moments, on the watch for another appearance, but nothing happened. There was no question of any more fishing, and we recovered our lines. El Suizo started the engine, or rather tried to. For it wouldn't fire. He tried a second time and a third. In vain.

Quite often the prehistoric motors with which the Cojimar boats were equipped failed to fire at the first swing; sometimes one had to try five or six times, and even remove some of the parts, blow down pipes or hit them with a hammer. It never meant more than a few minutes' delay.

This time, chance decided to prolong the night's entertainment. The engine refused to start. When El Suizo

saw that he would have to take it down altogether (for there was no hope of rowing back) he went mad with fury. He swore and kicked the tools and lines. Spanish is almost as rich in imprecations as Italian; but when at last he had ceased to curse machines, heaven, fishing, and sharks, he squatted down in front of the engine and began dismantling it.

“There’s not even any whisky left,” he remarked sadly.

From time to time he stopped work to look at the sea, as I did; and each of us knew what the other was looking for.

Had the manta ray dived for good? Or was it perhaps swimming gently a few fathoms below us? We surveyed the sea with a numb dread, and in my mind’s eye I still beheld that hideous sight. From what I’d been able to see, the beast was far larger than our boat. I didn’t believe the legends of Cojimar, but I knew very well that the ray could toss us like a pancake, if the whim took it to come and have a closer look at us.

There was at least an hour to go before daybreak; all round us, sea and sky were a dirty, greyish colour—a colour of nightmare. El Suizo said not a word. He had discovered the cause of the breakdown, and in another ten minutes he would have finished.

Suddenly there was a bump—a sort of long brushing against the keel—and I stopped breathing. El Suizo peered into the water, but it was still too dark for him to make out anything in it. He rose.

“It was nothing,” he said. “A shark came too close.”

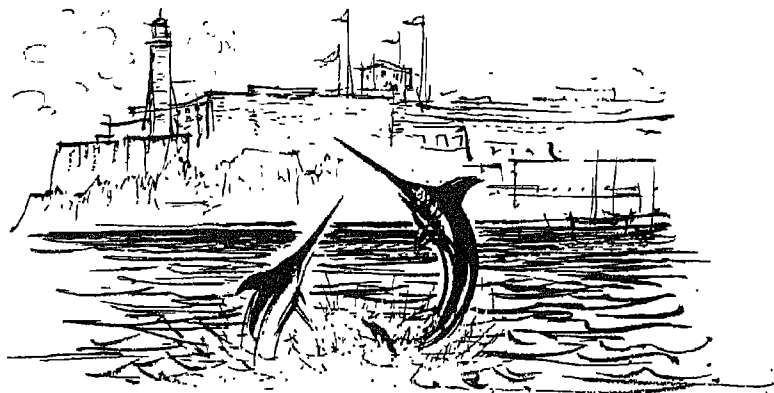
At last the engine began roaring. El Suizo headed for the shore, and when we came within a few cable’s-lengths of the harbour we felt safe. Day came upon us suddenly—as always in the tropics—and it seemed to us as if the

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

entire village had gathered on the beach. The people had clustered round a group of excited fishermen, and we supposed that one of them had brought in an unusual catch. We drew near, and only then did we see Alvarez' boat: she was aground, half-full of water, her lines tangled, her engine submerged. Alvarez was standing beside her; the newly risen sun was beginning to dry his clothes, but it was obvious that he had fallen fully dressed into the sea. He still didn't quite know what had happened. He had been fishing when a violent shock had literally lifted his craft out of the water. Next moment he had found himself floundering in the darkness some yards from the boat.

Having managed to get aboard again, he found the boat half-swamped and afloat only by a miracle. He tried to bale her out and return to shore, but the engine had been strained by the shock. He called for help, and two other boats came up and towed him in. The rescuers themselves wondered what could have happened.

El Suizo gave me a meaning glance, and then went up to Alvarez to tell him what we had seen on the surface of the sea.



CHAPTER THREE

ONE morning the same broken-winded bus that had brought us to Cojimar took us back to Havana. We found little change there: a new ship had come into port, and in the tobacco-plantations near Pinar del Rio a new batch of emigrants had just begun a new life. I moved into a hotel in the old town. A strange hotel, not mentioned in any Baedeker and never likely to be. At the end of the courtyard, beneath our windows, an old negro spent his days sitting on a chair smoking marijuana cigarettes: the drug can be bought for a song in all Caribbean, Central American, and South American ports. Above this white-haired addict—this Harriet Beecher Stowe character—there was a sort of roof-terrace overlooking a silent house—a house in the Edgar Allan Poe genre: a sinister place, seemingly deserted, whose windows were never opened. The terrace was littered with masks and other fancy-dress properties, confetti and dusty streamers; and dominating all this junk were two white aprons splashed with red, placed like witnesses to a strange and sanguinary carnival. I never discovered who had left them there.

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

But that was not the only unusual feature of this hotel. The room next to mine was occupied by a sort of phantom who emerged only at night, with a felt hat pulled down over his eyes, and who lurked behind closed shutters all day. He was an American; he had no visitors and took all his meals in his room. One morning he departed—between two policemen.

The Caribbean islands, and especially Cuba, have always been the refuge of Americans wanted by the police. This hotel often gave such travellers shelter, and I later learned that my floor-waiter believed for a long time that I, too, was taking a compulsory holiday in the tropics. In extenuation it should be mentioned that he seemed to be of recent descent from the chimpanzees, and inherited their face, teeth, and long, hairy arms, which reached nearly to the floor.

One evening I left the hotel to take a walk round the harbour. I was looking for someone whose name had been given me by Miguel Ramirez, Hemingway's Old Man: Curt Bloem. He was a German who had lived in Cuba for some years and become one of the most proficient shark-fishers in the island. His speciality was a type of fishing that I longed to try: angling for big-game fish with rod and reel.

This sport brings scores of enthusiasts to the Caribbean (notably Michael Lerner, American underwear king, Raymond Loewy, and of course Hemingway) and bears little resemblance to the Cojimar type of fishing. The hooks are of the same size, but the line is hardly thicker than that used for catching pike; so it is not a matter of strength only, but of skill. The nylon line may snap at any moment, and hours—sometimes a whole day—may be needed to bring the catch alongside. I was told of some

BLOEM'S WAY OF LIFE

who having hooked a particularly belligerent tuna or marlin on Monday evening were unable to get it aboard until midday on Tuesday.

The angler sits on a pivoted chair bolted to the deck. The short rod, of which the butt fits into a socket in the seat, between his knees, is equipped with a huge reel which can take hundreds of yards of line. The drum is designed to pay out line automatically, at each violent pull of the fish, thus greatly reducing the risk of breaking; but the problem is how to prevent the fish from pulling too often, for otherwise each catch takes a very long time to land. This is where the angler's skill comes in. He must avoid letting the line slacken for more than a few seconds, as such slackening gives the fish a chance of getting off the hook.

Full of these—still quite theoretical—ideas, I went to the harbour where Curt Bloem lived. My chance of finding him was slight. Ramirez had warned me that Bloem acted as fishing-guide to American tourists and that as soon as he had collected a few hundred dollars—which was soon done, as he charged forty dollars a trip—he didn't set foot in his house again until he had drunk the lot. After each of these bouts his route led at first light to the dwelling of one or other of his five or six mistresses; for before he took up shark-fishing, Bloem had fished for pearl in the Red Sea and kept company with Arab princes, and he had never quite lost the outlook and mode of life acquired from them.

The portrait drawn by Ramirez of this ex-petty officer of the Kriegsmarine suggested the hero of a novel by Henry de Monfried. In about 1930, at the age of twenty-five, he had left Berlin, his birthplace, to seek adventure

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

on the coast of Arabia, hoping to make his fortune there as a coffee-planter. Then he had fished for pearl near the Farasan Islands, off the Yemeni coast. He had been able to hire a small dhow, and having engaged a crew of Somali divers, he anchored for months at a time over the banks where pearl-oysters thrive at a depth of four or five fathoms. He had dived himself, and made the acquaintance of the *döl*, a torpedo-fish the width of a hand whose electrical discharge burns like hot iron; the *loethi*, which raises huge blisters, and above all those shell-fish the size of a giant clam, which close suddenly on the hand or foot of a diver and hold him so relentlessly that his only means of regaining the surface is by severing wrist or ankle.

When diving on those banks reputed to be the most dangerous but offering the best chance of finding the largest pearls, he wore the long black shirt intended to ward off the attacks of sharks. The outcome of all this activity was two handfuls of pearls, which he dissipated in the taverns and at the gaming-tables of the Middle East. Then he started all over again. Pearls, a bit of gun-running, salvage-work, the Kriegsmarine, and Cuba.

He had landed in Cuba only a few months after the German capitulation, by some mysterious means, and at once started a little shark-fishery on the coast of the province of Camarguey, not very far from Santiago de Cuba. He had owned a dozen boats and employed about thirty men for some months; he had bought cranes and machinery for the skinning and commercial exploitation of his catch; then he sold the whole business overnight and spent the proceeds in Havana in a few weeks.

Since then he had worked as a fishing-guide. He owned one boat, eighteen feet long, but trim as a yacht and almost as fast as a powered craft. She was *El Tiburón*, the Shark.

SECRET, SMOKY DIVES

Such was the man I had to track through Havana—for naturally he was not at home. For several nights I combed the town for him in vain.

In the alleys round about the Prado, where negro, mulatto, and white women take possession of the pavements at nightfall, I discovered secret, smoky dives; I entered the Shanghai and the Tropicana: two establishments whose like I hardly think could be found in any other part of the world.

The first of these is a cinema and theatre at which, quite legally and for a few centavos only, one may see pornographic films imported under the protecting wing of Berlin or Paris. Among the audience are respectable mothers of families; during the intervals sweet-sellers also sell obscene photographs. The other place, the Tropicana, is the most extraordinary monument ever erected by man to the god of nocturnal pleasures. It is situated at the heart of a genuine forest lit by neon; it has two stages, two dance-floors, two managers, and a tariff twice as high as that of any other place of entertainment in Havana. There are also roulette-rooms and slot-machines imported from Las Vegas or Chicago: these take coins up to a dollar.

The whole place occupies an area about the size of the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris; every day, an aircraft chartered by the management takes off from Havana and collects a cargo of night-birds from Miami, one hour's flight away.

After questioning countless bar-tenders I found one who could help me. He was working at the Tropi-Ranch, where at that time a strip-tease dancer, Estela Mary from the Argentine, was appearing; for weeks I had carried her about in my pocket in the form of coloured photographs printed on match-boxes, which showed her attired simply

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

in black stockings, with a moist lip and languorous eye. (In Cuba, children are not allowed to play with matches.)

This gorgeous red-head made a fortune for the place by an erotic dance-number more daring than anything that had been seen in Havana for a very long time—and that is saying a good deal. The bluest strip-tease acts of Paris and Berlin seem like a charity fête beside the shows that form part of the normal night-life of Havana.

The helpful bar-tender led me through the outskirts of the town to a house which seemed to me to date from the Spanish Conquest. Its walls were cracked, and the carved door beneath which a ray of light escaped had by way of knocker a heavy iron ring, which had to be raised and dropped several times: three short knocks and two long. In response to this code-signal the door opened, revealing a long, dim, smoky room.

The smell floating in the air was that of marijuana. In one corner was a bar and all round the low tables groups of men were slumped in their chairs like those collapsible dolls that one inflates by squeezing a rubber bulb.

Each customer was intent on his private, drug-borne visions, and not one of them so much as raised his head when we came in. The repugnance I felt on entering was due not merely to the unbreathable air, after the coolness and fragrance of the night; but also to the silence, broken now and then by hysterical yells and sobs; to the half-darkness; to the twitches and spasmodic movements of the smokers, and to the emptiness of their eyes.

Curt Bloem was sitting at a table alone, his tall figure bent in two. His face as he watched us coming was void of expression; he was soaked in the drug. The conversation promised to be interesting—but would the welcome, perhaps, be chilly? Everything depended on this first en-

BLOEM EMERGES FROM THE DEPTHS

counter, and the idea crossed my mind—a little belatedly—that it might be a mistake to corner him like this in his lair. He was as Ramirez had described him, recognisable among a thousand; an enormously tall, thread-like figure with a hairless head, prominent cheek-bones, eyes sunk in their sockets and eyelashes singed to the level of the lids.

He was fifty, but might as easily have been thirty-five or sixty. He was ageless, like the Chinese. His whole appearance gave an impression of shabbiness and lassitude. What energy he had left—and there was little enough—seemed to have taken refuge in his eyes. In the depths of those grey irises a tiny flame wavered, which a breath, one felt, would have extinguished. He showed no surprise when we sat down beside him, but signed to the waiter to bring two glasses, which he filled to the brim with whisky. I spoke to him of Ramirez, and he seemed slowly to emerge from the depths.

"Ah, Ramirez," he said. "I thought he was dead. . . . But he's preserved in salt, that fellow, like anchovies." He spoke in English, with remarkable ease. He knew Paris, having spent seven days' leave there during the war; and all at once he began talking French with an ease by no means as remarkable; he recalled some night-club in the Place Pigalle where he had spent an unforgettable evening; then he relapsed into dreamy silence, whence he emerged after a few seconds to murmur "Lousy war . . ."

By the end of half an hour, with the aid of alcohol, we were chatting away together like friends of twenty years' standing. Shark-fishing? Nothing easier. "Tomorrow or the day after," he said, "when the sea's calmer." Money? No, he would take nothing from any friend of Ramirez; and in any case he was in no need of money at

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

the moment, and was quite certain of taking out half a dozen tourists within the next few days. . . . After that I let the evening drift slowly by on the fumes of alcohol. I only remember that at one moment one of the only two women smoking marijuana in this den—a mulatto—rose and slipped a coin into the juke-box by the bar. Then, under the influence of marijuana and spirits she performed a musical strip-tease number which would have made even a Cuban censor blink. It took place behind a curtain that hid the end of the room, in the presence of a single spectator: the one who got up first. . . . I was told that women of the best society sometimes smuggled themselves into this hole, where the police never came. I remember also bringing Bloem back to the port in the early dawn and seeing him flop into his boat, unable to struggle the last hundred yards to his house.

It was there I found him two days later, though he wasn't sleeping there any more now and was busy overhauling his lines. The *Shark* gleamed in the sunlight, freshly scrubbed.

As I went up to him I began to fear that he wouldn't recognise me or remember his promise; but he had forgotten nothing. He made the face which with him passed for a smile, and jerked his head at the glimpse of open sea visible beyond the calm waters of the harbour.

"Sea bad," he said in his broken French. "Not fish today. Tomorrow perhaps."

I sat down on the edge of the quay and watched him titivate his boat, while the sun gently warmed my shoulders. Squatting on stones along the dockside, or seated on little camp-stools, men in panamas angled for small fish with the patience of retired businessmen. They jerked

SIX SWORDFISH ATTACK A WHALE

their rods and caught nothing; we might have been on the banks of the Seine.

Suddenly, as if to give them hope, a fish leaped in the middle of the harbour, like a bleak chased by a pike; but this fugitive weighed several hundred pounds. During the second of time when it seemed to hang motionless some feet above the surface I identified it as a swordfish or a sail-fish, from its bill. Hardly had it sounded when another of the same kind and size leaped in its turn, and for some seconds we watched these whirling monsters fighting it out together. They churned the waters of the harbour into wild tumult, of which the wash died away at our feet.

Bloem jumped up on to the quay, and as we made for a café a few yards off he told me of a fight of an even rarer kind that he had witnessed some years before. He was aboard a fishing-boat one night off the Brazilian coast, when a small sperm whale surfaced a few cable's-lengths away. He was able to follow part of the ensuing battle through his binoculars; for the whale was attacked by five or six swordfish. An amazing sight to behold by the light of the moon.

"I felt as if I were back in the early ages of the world," Bloem said, "when prehistoric monsters fought one another for possession of the seas."

The battle lasted for no more than a few seconds, and then the whale sounded. When the boat reached the point where the struggle had taken place, no trace remained. Next day Bloem found a great spongy mass floating on the sea not far away. It aroused his curiosity; it was greyish and smelt of musk. If he had known then what it was he would have danced for joy on the deck. But he did not know, and acting on a hunch rather than

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

from any real conviction, he had this peculiar substance hoisted aboard.

It was ambergris, an intestinal secretion which in its death-agony the sperm whale expels through the anus, and which is used chiefly in perfumery, for fixing scent. It is worth fortunes, and this find brought Bloem nearly a million francs (£1000).

In the café to which Bloem took me there were some men whom he seemed to know very well, but who, as I soon realised, did not figure on the municipal payroll. One of them had long made a living by convoying cargoes of cigars which were sold surreptitiously on the coasts of Europe; another owned a boat which he used now and then for shark-fishing, but chiefly for prospecting round the island after every hurricane, in search of wrecks of all kinds. These men were sitting in the corner silently playing cards; the only sound to be heard was the rustling of handfuls of Cuban dollars.

Not far from them, sitting at a table alone, was an old man wearing a white duck suit and a yachting-cap. This was Charles Roca, the doyen of the fishing-guides in Cuba. Roca was seventy-six; he knew even better than Bloem all the big-game fishers who gathered in the Caribbean islands every year. Michael Lerner, especially, fished with him regularly, and it was with him that Raymond Loewy got into a swordfish which leaped over a hundred times into the air before allowing itself to be brought alongside. And so on and so on.

When Roca talked about fishing his eyes shone and his parchment cheeks flushed; a sort of breeze swept through him and seemed on the point of filling him out and smoothing away all his wrinkles.

"Hemingway often used to come fishing with me," he said, "and then one day he bought his own boat, the *Pilar*. But he doesn't do any fishing now; he's too old."

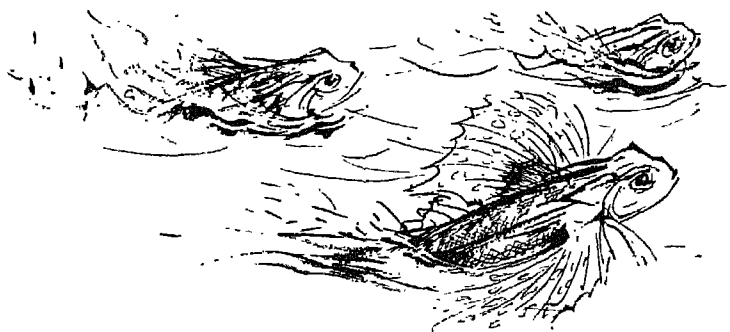
In the course of the fortnight that Lerner had spent the previous year in angling from the *Caiman*, Roca's boat, he had managed to land about fifty fish, but an equal number got away through the line breaking. Occasions like this when a line was lost owing to the strength or combativeness of a fish were a nightmare to all anglers.

"If all the lengths of line I've lost since I began fishing in the Caribbean were put end to end," said Charles Roca, "they'd go right round the earth; and you could build a mountain with the shark, marlin, sail-fish, and tuna that must still be cruising about with my hooks in their mouths. I've sometimes caught fish that I'd hooked a year or two before, still trailing yards of line behind them. As long as a fish fights on the surface you can generally land it in the end. But if it dives, three times out of four you may as well say good-bye to your hook."

During this same day, the hot wind that had ruffled the sea for some time past dropped entirely, and two days later the *Shark* was able to put to sea.

When we arrived at the fishing-grounds the sun was some way above the horizon, and already the sea was overlaid with a sparkling, oppressive film of heat. But for the furtive dashes of little flocks of flying-fish one might have thought the sea was deserted. Not a sail. Not the smallest fin.

The boat was moving at half speed, with a piece of wood the size of a pencil-box trailing astern by a long line. Bloem fetched the rods that he had laid on the deck-house as the pencil-box began dancing on the water; it was there to attract the fish. On each side of it, a few inches below



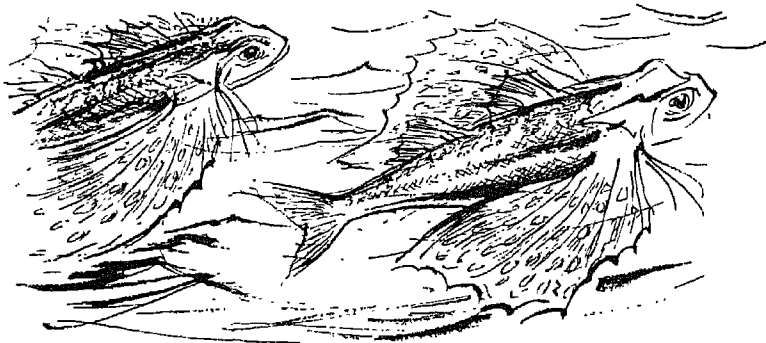
the surface, were our two hooks, hidden in tufts of brightly coloured feathers. And the period of waiting began.

Bloem, bending over his rod, naked to the waist and with his eyes half-closed, seemed asleep. But through those narrow slits the thin thread of his gaze was fixed on the lure and its tiny trail of foam, and never left it for an instant.

There was a third man on board the *Shark*, one Chato, a negro of about fifteen, who was at the helm and was steering the boat in wide circles. His orders were to stop the engine at the first bite.

Five minutes, twenty minutes went by. Bloem stirred no more than a block of marble.

Beneath the sun that was now scorching my shoulders, my vision became clouded; dark glasses were no help. I lost sight of the lure, found it again, and again lost it. What creature would be the first to rise from this blinding sea, beyond which the shoreline seemed to melt suddenly, like a mirage? A red tuna? A shark? A sail-fish? A siren? We had little chance of catching a swordfish, for these as a rule are to be found only at night. Suddenly Bloem unclenched his teeth:



"To the left of your lure, about six feet," he said. "Look!"

A sudden flurry, a light trail of foam—something was chasing the bunch of feathers. Bloem signed to Chato, who reduced speed. Any moment now.

But nothing happened. Chato had slowed down too abruptly. The huge fish overtook the lure and cruised about astern for a few seconds in bewilderment.

Chato started the engine again. Three seconds later, quite unexpectedly, the fish took the lure. I saw no disturbance round it and felt no more than a slight tremor; only by the whistling of the line as it flew out did I realise what had happened. I waited a few seconds; then, when the line slackened somewhat, I put on the check and struck.

The resulting jerk on my arm took my breath away . . . and thirty seconds later I reeled in my line; it had parted some yards from the hook, and a huge fish went down with a feather-duster in its stomach.

"You struck too soon and too hard," remarked Bloem, with a tinge of regret in his voice.

A few minutes later we had another bite, this time at Curt Bloem's lure. He struck, and the slow, interminable playing began.



By what seemed to me very strenuous efforts, he raised and lowered his rod with the regularity of a metronome, reeling in at full speed as he brought the rod from the vertical to the horizontal position. At each sudden tug of the fish Bloem stopped, releasing a few yards of nylon; then the metronome resumed its motion. At other times, angler and fish were motionless, face to face, the man unable to recover an inch of line, the fish unable to drag it out. And as a rule it was the fish that gave in.

I had reeled in my line and was now watching the ex-pearl-fisher hauling in his exhausted prey. His eyelids seemed closer together than ever, and beneath the left eye a muscle was twitching slightly. Was it from effort or excitement? I had often wondered what had impelled

MY LUCK IS OUT

this tall, dried-up character to settle in Cuba; the answer perhaps lay in that little quivering muscle—in that and marijuana. (I later asked him whether he ever meant to go back to Germany to live, and I remember that in reply he said something like this: if the tropics moved, he might—on the other hand he might not. He had lived there so little. His father had been killed in a raid over Düsseldorf, and he had no one there now. He struck the deck with the heel of his rope-soled shoe and added in French: "Can't do without this—understand? Like gambling, never know what will come out of the sea. Three years ago I caught a thousand-pound shark. Now I wait for one of 1500, or 2000 . . .")

The one he landed that day, after a half-hour struggle, weighed only 300 lb.; it was the first of four that we succeeded in catching before returning to port at the end of the morning. That Bloem succeeded in catching, rather, for after my first failure no fish deigned to taste my tuft of feathers.

At three o'clock that afternoon the *Shark* was once more cruising six miles off shore; at four o'clock a shark and a sail-fish lay on the deck and Bloem cast his line for the seventh time.

At five o'clock I had to face the fact that I should get nothing that day; no matter how intently my eyes searched the sea or remained fixed on the lure (I was now able to keep it in my field of vision for minutes at a time), nothing happened. I asked Bloem to take my place and let me have his line. Half an hour went by, at the end of which he hooked a five-hundred pound swordfish. . . .

Hemingway tells the story somewhere of a wrecker who found a sunken liner which had struck a reef near the island of Tortuga, and sunk in a few minutes—too quickly

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

for any passengers to escape. The wreck lay at a depth of eight or ten fathoms and the man dived down to it. In one of the staterooms lay the body of a woman; he could see her through a porthole. Her long hair floated with the stirring of the sea, and on one of her fingers she wore a large diamond.

The looter returned to his boat for something he could use to break the glass of the porthole, then dived again and set to work. No shark came to disturb him, but the glass was too tough. He had to return to Havana. When he came back a little later, better equipped, other divers had had time to rifle the vessel of much of her contents.

A few days after that, not a single shark was caught in those waters, and for weeks not one was found within miles. They seemed to have emigrated, heaven only knew where.

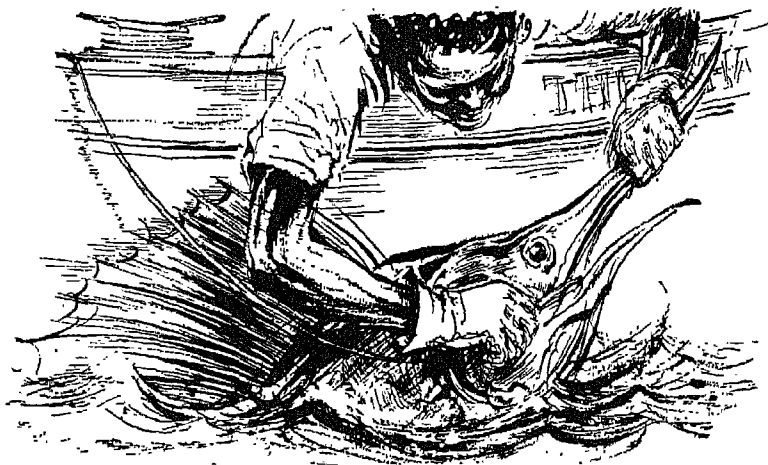
And so they had—into the boat, through a hole in the lower part of the hull, and had been banqueting all this time on the bodies trapped within.

I watched my lure and, remembering this tale, suspected that something of the sort must have happened here. Somewhere in the depths, on a bed of sand and seaweed, a vessel slept with her passengers on board.

From time to time a shark emerged and took the German's bait, just to annoy me.

At last the sun set. In the recesses of the boat Chato discovered two warm water-melons which we bit into to quench our thirst, while darkness took possession of the sea. Bloem reeled in his line and the *Shark* headed back to port.

It was the following night, a little after midnight, that I caught my first swordfish.



CHAPTER FOUR

DURING the days that followed, the sea remained as calm as a lake and the *Shark* was able to put out regularly from port. Bloem spent most afternoons playing cards with the wrecker and the ex-cigar-trader in the café to which he had taken me; for as a rule we fished only in the morning or at night.

Between seven o'clock and midday it was chiefly sail-fish that took the bait, and we let them go, as they had no commercial value. The few specimens that Bloem brought ashore were used for bait or cat's-meat.

To return these harmless monsters to their element—the largest of them were ten or twelve feet long—Chato leaned over the side, seized the short bill in his gloved hand and pulled out the big hook. For a few seconds the sail-fish floated bewildered quite close by, then slowly returned to the healing depths.

Sometimes the hook was embedded in the stomach, and

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

in order to recover it we had to kill the fish. We hoisted it aboard after clubbing it, and Chato plunged the flensing-knife into its throat, bringing the hook out together with a thin stream of black blood. By some mysterious chemical process the creature changed colour on leaving the water. Its long, dark body became iridescent, and when dry took on a metallic appearance.

Once a sail-fish had taken the hook we rarely failed to bring it alongside, whatever its size, as it fought on the surface. It was not so with the shark, or even with the swordfish. Sharks often sounded and disappeared for ever, and to try to recover a shark weighing several hundred kilos was as hopeless as trying to haul up a locomotive. I remember a day when Bloem fought for over two hours with what was apparently a huge shark. For ten minutes, by exerting all his skill, he succeeded in keeping the great fish within a few feet of the surface, his line tense and quivering at breaking-point. Then inch by inch the shark went down.

Night-fishing was more profitable. Bloem had a contract with the owner of one of the factories which handle the marketable products of the big fish of the Caribbean, and at the end of every fishing-trip a van came to take delivery of the five or six sharks or swordfish that we had caught. As we brought home two or three swordfish every night, Bloem collected quite a handsome sum at the end of the week.

Occasionally we brought back a tuna or two, and then we ordered triple whiskies. But that seldom happened. Spring had not yet come, and it is then that the red tuna—thin and hungry and weighing about 300 pounds—moves north to the coast of Canada and its seething shoals of small fish. Nor was it the season for American tourists,

PHOTOGRAPHED IN ALL POSITIONS

the big-game fishing enthusiasts, whose migration coincides with that of the tuna; yet now and again we did take a few out with us.

Down by the harbour one morning I found Bloem in conversation with a sort of ex-Indian-Army colonel wearing a white suit and a large panama; he had just arrived from London and wanted to spend a day or two angling for big fish. "Mr Hammerstock," said Bloem; and turning to me with an imperceptible wink of his little grey eye, he added for the stranger's benefit, "my assistant. Mr Poli is a Frenchman." A startled glint came into the colonel's eyes: he was to go fishing with a German and a Frenchman! Adventurers, no doubt.

"*Mon femme*," said Mr Hammerstock, who had learnt French at school and, alas, remembered it, "my wife she want to take the photograph with a camera while I take the fish from the water. Do you think that is possible?" It was possible, and Mr Hammerstock bowed. "Then it is arranged," he said. "I go tell she to prepare. I come back both of us in a minute."

They came, both dressed in white shorts reaching to the knees and shirts patterned with green and yellow flowers. Mr Hammerstock wore a peaked cap, of the eye-shade type, and Mrs Hammerstock carried a variety of photographic apparatus, of which the straps criss-crossed in all directions over her ample bosom. Mr Hammerstock was photographed in all positions: stepping into the boat, sitting down in it, reeling in his line, casting it; from the rear, from the front, from the side, with set jaw, tense muscles and eyes fixed upon the boundless ocean. Mrs Hammerstock skipped from one end of the boat to the other—which is a mere figure of speech, for with every movement of hers the vessel rolled as if in a heavy swell.

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

She had tied a handkerchief round her head and wore a pair of enormous dark goggles in leather frames, like a despatch-rider.

Not a single fish nibbled at Mr Hammerstock's bait all that morning; the boat was in an area where we never fished, and where there was not the remotest chance of catching the smallest shark. I knew this. And Curt Bloem knew it better than I did. But he had decided not to give Mr Hammerstock his first shark until the next day, thus ensuring for himself a further payment of forty dollars.

In certain parts of Africa, I have read, safari guides plant enormous pieces of meat in the same place every day for weeks, to attract the lions known to be in the neighbourhood. At the same time they blow loud blasts on a whistle. The lions, obeying Pavlov's reflex, quickly come to associate the whistle with food, so that on the day when the guide is really obliged to bring one of them within range of a tourist's rifle, all he has to do is to send one of his men with a whistle to the spot where a small number of the animals have been trained to come and be killed.

I haven't tested the efficacy of the method myself, but Curt Bloem's dodge certainly worked, and Mr Hammerstock paid him another forty dollars next day.

"In two months from now," he said to me, as for the second time our boat made for the open sea, "do you know what I'll do? I shall go back to London and show my friends at the club the photographs and the film of me with the big fish, and never again will they bore me to death with the four-pound trout they caught in the river on Sunday."

In the course of this second day Mr Hammerstock suffered acutely. A heavy swell reinforced a cruel sun, and

GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

he was sea-sick. Clamped to his swivel-chair, sweating, dull-eyed, the peak of his cap askew, he endured martyrdom. Nevertheless, he would not give in until he had succeeded in catching his first sail-fish.

When the monster took the bait, Mrs Hammerstock seized her finest camera (she carried three) and filmed feverishly. As soon as the fish was lashed to the deck, Mr Hammerstock turned to Bloem and with a gesture of great dignity indicated that it was time to return to port. He took leave of us in the manner of a patient saying good-bye to a dentist who has just extracted two of his teeth. "And I hope I shall never see you again," said the large eyes of Mr Hammerstock, as his face regained something of its normal colour; and he bowed and shook hands.

I saw him some days later at the Tropicana, drinking whisky at one of the tables and gloomily watching the successive turns.

"Don't talk to me about fishing," he said. "It's grounds for divorce. Do you know what happened to the film? It was entirely blank. My wife forgot to take the dust-cover off the lens before shooting!"

Some mornings later, a boat with two divers aboard anchored a few cable's-lengths from the *Shark*. We recovered our lines and went over to her. She belonged to a Cuban salvage company, and had come a few miles out from shore to a place where the water was only five fathoms deep. Here, on a bed of sand and seaweed, lay the wreck of a vessel about the size of the *Shark*.

"It's the *San Carlos*," Bloem told me. "Remember the man who came into the café the other night, Juan Cordogna? He was her owner."

Six months before, Cordogna had been caught in a



tornado while out fishing with his son and another man. Tornadoes can usually be avoided, but this one came so suddenly and violently that the *San Carlos* had no time to make port. She was a very old boat, powered by an engine which could only just move her through a calm sea. Caught in this storm, the *San Carlos* soon sprang a leak. Cordogna, realising that she couldn't stay afloat for an hour, hastily built a raft with the help of his son and the other fisherman from what planks he could tear from the hull, lashing them all together with his lines. There were two life-belts on board, and Cordogna gave them to his passengers. His son was twelve years old, the other was an elderly man. All three tied themselves to the raft and abandoned ship a few minutes before the *San Carlos* sank. Thus they remained for a day and a night. The exhausted old man lost consciousness at the end of the day. He had tied himself to one end of the raft, about ten feet from Cordogna and the boy, and now he slid into the sea but did not quite disappear, the lower half of his body remaining fast to the raft, both by the safety-line and by one leg that had become wedged between two planks.

ORDEAL BY SHARKS

"Cordogna told me he could do nothing to save him," Bloem said. "It would have meant cutting his own line to reach him, and there were no hand-holds. 'And my son was clinging to me,' he said."

When the wind dropped the old man's body was still half-submerged. And now came the sharks.

When sharks attack their prey they dash at it like lightning and then see-saw a little, open their jaws, and in snapping them tear off a piece of flesh. The see-sawing movement arises from the fact that the mouth is not at the very front but underneath and several inches back. This was the sight that Cordogna and his son had to watch for some hours.

They were at the end of their strength; the planks of the raft to which they were still lashed held together only by a miracle, while the presence of the corpse was at once a protection and a threat, for though it engaged the attention of the sharks, the blood from it attracted more and more of them. Soon there were half a dozen swimming round and round. They were small ones, but Cordogna realised that a big one might arrive at any moment and that the body must be got rid of as soon as possible. If a full-grown shark were to seize it and try to drag it under, the raft would be bound to capsize. Cordogna cut the line and tipped the remains of the corpse into the sea, and the sharks disappeared.

Some hours later Cordogna and his son were picked up; the boy was unconscious.

"The lad got over the shock," Bloem ended, "but Cordogna hasn't recovered from it yet. After the shipwreck he went about in a sort of daze, and he's never set foot in a boat since."

For some moments we watched the divers immersing

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

the lower part of the metal cage in which they would be able to work out of reach of the sharks. What did they hope to get from the *San Carlos*, one wondered. Lead from the keel? The rest, so far as we could see, was already covered with a thick deposit of weed and shells. One more wreck in the Caribbean: the world's largest concentration of sunken treasure. About fifty yards from what had been the *San Carlos*, at the edge of the sand-bank and beyond a rocky precipice, the sea-bed shelves abruptly to a depth of a hundred fathoms or more; and it was there, in those submarine caverns where the wrecks are out of reach, that diving would have been profitable.

How much treasure slept undisturbed within the radius of a mile or two of the *San Carlos*? How many gold-laden galleons had foundered centuries before in waters where sharks alone now glided in silence? It was curious to reflect that the lines of the penniless Cojimar fishermen must more than once have brushed against wealth untold.

"If I could have just one wish," said Bloem, as we headed for the shore, "I would moor a buoy somewhere in the Caribbean and draw a circle round it with the radius of a mile. Then I would dry up the sea within it, and open an account with the Chase National City Bank of New York."

With these thoughts in our minds we entered harbour; but Bloem had not yet finished speaking of wrecks.

A year earlier, he told me, when he was at Ciudad Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, a diver brought news to the harbour cafés there. Owing to a mysterious upheaval of the sea-bed, the wreck of an ancient Spanish galleon laden with gold, which had sunk a few miles off-shore and defied earlier attempts at salvage, had now become accessible.

SUNKEN TREASURE

That same afternoon two hastily chartered boats with divers on board anchored above the wreck. The skippers began parleying, but neither of them would concede the other's right of priority. Revolvers were drawn and fired. One of the vessels possessed a heavy machine-gun which was brought into action. Result: seven deaths. On investigation the position of the wreck was found to be unchanged.

Incidents of this kind were not unusual. I once read an article in a Cuban paper in which the author stated that in the course of a few years many dozens of salvage-vessels had been sunk by rivals in the Caribbean.

In Cuba itself, somewhere about 1950, the police had to investigate the murder of a certain Carlo Rinocchi, an Italian immigrant whose body had been found in the cellar of his villa. Rinocchi had been tortured before being put to death. The arrest of the two murderers enabled the police to reconstruct the story.

While on a voyage off Isla de Pinos near Cuba (Stevenson's Treasure Island), Rinocchi had discovered a wreck. He at once got in touch with an Italian salvage-company; but, after posting his letter, he made the mistake of talking about his find.

Years before, in the Mediterranean, Bloem himself was, as we have seen, engaged in hunting for sunken treasure. He worked alone at first, and then for a big company. It was the latter, he told me, which commissioned one of its investigators to examine the possibility of refloating a wreck discovered off Palermo by a Sicilian fisherman—a wreck which had been the focus of a sordid drama of greed.

The fisherman's name was Cesare Bonatempo; he was seventy. One morning, when hauling in his catch,

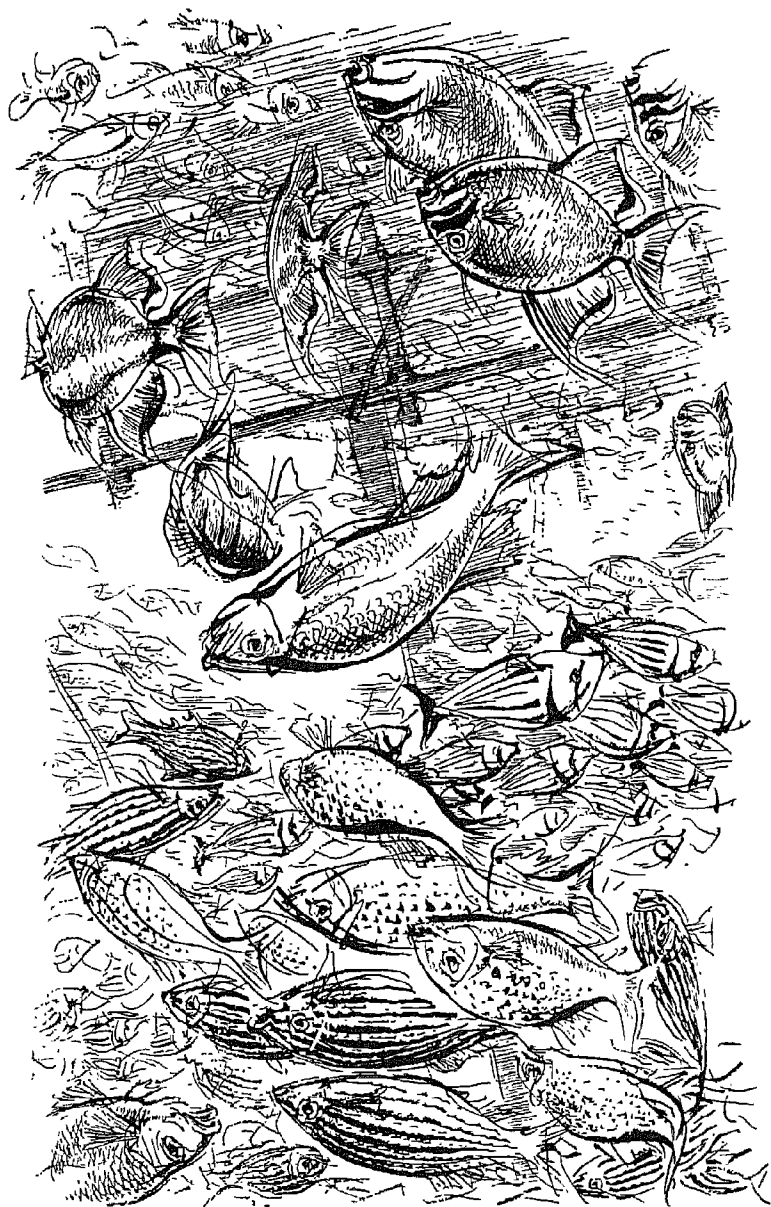
SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

Bonatempo found that his nets were incredibly heavy; yet they contained only fish. A miraculous draught of fishes. The same thing happened next day and the days that followed. Bonatempo was convinced that these repeated gifts of Providence had some mundane explanation. Like all fishermen, he knew that more fish gather above a wreck than anywhere else. By means of the kind of spy-glass used by Sicilians when tracking the shoals of tunny that enter the Mediterranean every year through the straits of Gibraltar—a tube closed at one end by a piece of glass—he searched the part of the sea that yielded so rich a harvest every morning. There, on the rocky bottom, lay a wreck. The scene was set. Bonatempo was tempted to talk about his find: did the wreck contain treasure? It might not. If he were to talk, all the fishermen would know its position. . . . Bonatempo held his tongue, and brought home such a catch every morning that people became inquisitive.

One day when the old man was just making ready to shove out, two men came up to him and dragged him in among the rocks at revolver-point. They hit him, but still he wouldn't talk. He fell, and in falling struck his head on a rock.

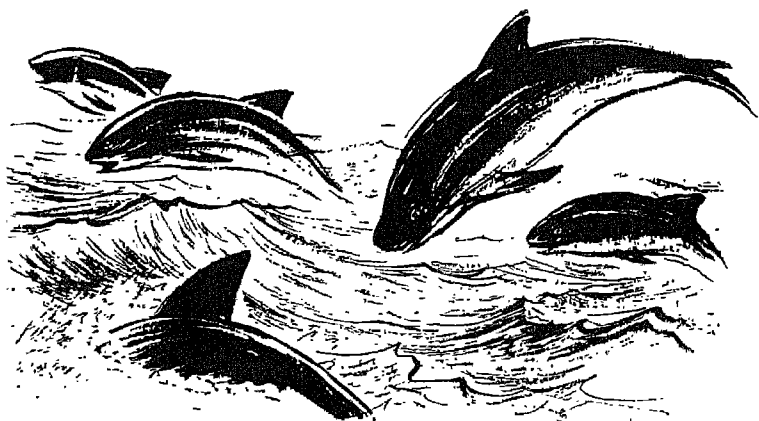
It was at the foot of this rock that he was found a little later by some children; he was taken to hospital, where he died some days afterwards. The wreck was searched; there was nothing in it.

"When I came to Cuba," said Bloem, "I thought I'd do what I'd done in the Mediterranean. But one would need a lot of capital. Today it's the big companies that have the monopoly; a diver working on his own can bring up only odds and ends. The greatest of all the divers, Harry Riesenbergh, dived in the Bahamas in search of the



SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

famous Plate Fleet—the fleet that sank on its way from America to Spain, laden with gold and precious stones. But he never got rich on it. He recovered treasure worth millions; yet by the time he'd paid his expenses I doubt whether anything much was left."



CHAPTER FIVE

AT the entrance to Havana harbour stands a little ruined fort, Fort Morro, which at one time was used as a prison. Strange tales are told of it, and perhaps this one is the strangest. In days long past the warders would sometimes allow a prisoner to escape, on condition he went by the pipe that led from the fort down to the sea and was used as a refuse-tip. The pipe was vertical, and just big enough for a man to slide down, and where it ended the waters were, of course, infested with sharks.

How many accepted the offer? Cuban history supplies no details, but it is said that at least one prisoner succeeded in reaching the coast unharmed. Before going, he begged the warder for a pot of black paint; he then painted himself all over and jumped. . . . Later he bought a little business, so the story goes, and lived to a great age.

This tale was told me by Señor Alfonso Mayo, the man who used to wait for us in the harbour after every fishing-trip to load our catch on to his van. One morning when I was walking with him to the foot of the fort he looked up suddenly and declared:

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

"Personally I have my doubts about that story."

I pointed out that the prisoner probably owed his safety to two things: first, he was covered with black paint, and sharks never attack that colour, and second, the sharks may have been elsewhere that day.

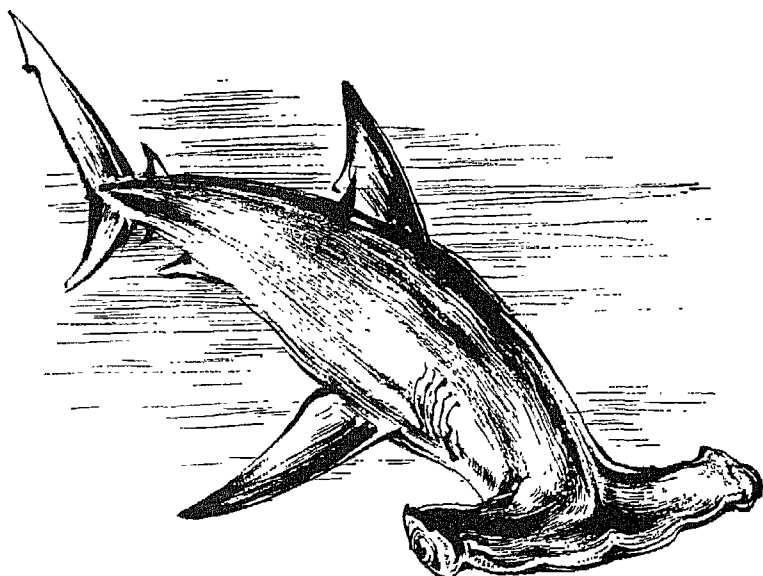
"Oh, it's not the sharks I'm thinking of," Alfonso answered. "What I can't quite swallow is that such sadism should have been shown by *Cuban* guards!"

Forty years devoted to the shark business had given Señor Mayo not only a sense of humour but also a profound knowledge of the habits of these great fish; he knew far better than I did that black gives almost complete protection from their attack (complete protection being afforded only by flight). In certain parts of the Caribbean, he told me, negroes often dived in shark-infested waters, after merely tarring the soles of their feet and the palms of their hands.

"I have heard of negroes being attacked, but I can only suppose they got among colonialist sharks."

We had passed the ruined fort. Alfonso sat down on the little wall overhanging the water and pulled a pipe from his pocket; when he lit it the flies that had followed us vanished in the hot air; the revolting blend of black tobacco that Alfonso smoked would have asphyxiated them. Enveloped in this protecting cloud, and at intervals spitting long, black jets into the sea, the tubby little man gave me a remarkable course of instruction on the habits of the shark.

I now learned that most of the sharks I had been catching for rather more than a month were blue shark and tiger-shark. (Only once at Cojimar had I seen a hammer-head brought in. It was about ten feet long and differed from other kinds in two ways: the classic hammer-shaped



head and the eyes, which, instead of being tiny, were as big as those of an ox.) Blue shark, like tiger-shark, Mayo told me, are man-eaters and cannibals.

At Cojimar especially, all fishermen knew that once a shark was hooked it was vital to haul it aboard as quickly as possible, or it would be devoured by its own kind. There were always some old newspapers in the boats and, on evenings when shark were especially numerous, the men would throw them well away into the sea to distract the ones that threatened to prevent them hoisting their prize aboard; for if black repels sharks, white has a real fascination for them.

When angling with a rod it was not always possible to bring in the catch quickly enough to save it from the voracious attacks of other fish. Often when Bloem or I had a swordfish or a shark on our hooks the line ran out suddenly as if dragged by a violent leap, and then suddenly slackened; after that we brought in only half a

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

swordfish or a shark's head, the rest having been carried below in the jaws of a cannibal.

"That's why I don't think that adventure in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is very probable," remarked Alfonso Mayo. "In a sea as infested with shark as this one, it seems to me it would be impossible for a man to get a marlin alongside intact, after having it at the end of his line for so many hours."

At the foot of the wall on which we were sitting, the sea was playing with clumps of seaweed and rubbish; the shark-trader seemed absorbed in the latter for a moment, then he added:

"One of the most extraordinary things about this creature is its sense of smell. Seamen say that any vessel with a corpse on board will be trailed by a little school of them. A legend, of course. . . . And yet, let me tell you a story. I once met the skipper of a freighter who for some years had been engaged in a rather peculiar trade. He sailed regularly from San Francisco to China, carrying the bodies of Chinese who had died in the United States and whose families wanted them to be buried in China. There was a small navigation-company that specialised in this sort of freight, and the skipper I'm talking about commanded the hearse-boat. He declared that whenever the vessel reached the open sea she was trailed by a little squadron of sharks which never left her until she made port. He hadn't always carried corpses, and he had seen sharks following other boats too, but never so persistently. Yet the bodies were sealed up in lead coffins and, if you'll excuse the detail, there wasn't the slightest smell."

Señor Mayo lived in a small house by the harbour. On our way to it I learned that there are several dozen different species of shark in existence, and that they're to be

“YOU CAN’T SCARE BARRACUDAS”

found in almost all the seas of the world, including the Mediterranean. There they are usually small and are regarded as harmless, as we may see from an item in a Nice newspaper which is before me as I write: “Off Saint-Laurent-du-Var, unknown fish bites bather’s leg. Probably a shark.” Another paper tells me that in 1956 two Marseilles fishermen caught two adult sharks in their nets. The accompanying photograph confirms this: they are undoubtedly sharks, and one of them is over seven feet long.

Perhaps the fish off Saint-Laurent-du-Var was really a barracuda? The sea-pike is as voracious as the shark, and in the Caribbean especially it sometimes attains such a size as to be more feared than “tigers.”

“Sharks are cowards,” Alfonso Mayo said. “If you wave your arms and shout at them when they’re tearing their prey to pieces on the surface, you can scare them off. But you can’t scare barracudas.”

In Greenland there is a kind of shark called the “sleeper-shark.” Eskimos catch them by cutting holes in the ice and lighting a fire near by; the shark is attracted by this and swims to the surface, where it can be harpooned. Another method is to lower a bladder filled with blood through the hole, by way of bait. The blood seeps through tiny holes pierced in the bladder and attracts the shark, which is then hauled on to the ice at the end of a baited line. In summer the Eskimos fish from kayaks, which, being usually smaller than the quarry, sometimes capsize. But this is not what they dread most. Their chief fear is that in rubbing against the kayak the shark may pierce it; for the skin of this species is covered with scales ending in awl-like points.

“I know shark-fishers who use whole carcasses as bait,”

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Mayo told me. "But those are heavy and wasteful. In my opinion nothing is better than a big bladder filled with blood, such as Eskimos use—a porpoise-bladder. The porpoise is a warm-blooded animal, and its blood sends the shark literally mad.

"But who could bring himself to kill a porpoise?" added Alfonso, with a shy, unexpected light of pity in his eyes. "Killing porpoises is like killing cows in a meadow. Porpoises are the clowns and tumblers of the sea, señor; they give pleasure and entertainment to seamen and travellers. My belief is that they're not brute beasts but our own ancestors, reincarnated, who come to help us pass the time."

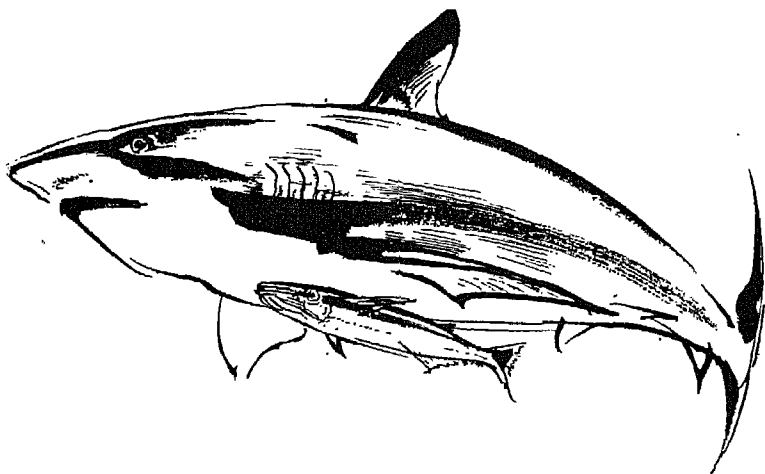
The big room that served as drawing-room in Alfonso Mayo's house was hung with nets and pictures of the Virgin; under each of the latter burned a little lamp: a wick soaking in a glass of oil. On a chest of drawers was a small stuffed shark. From one of the drawers the shark-trader took out a fossilised shark's tooth to show me: it was as broad as a man's hand. It dated, he told me, from about a hundred million years ago.

"Teeth are all that remain to us of prehistoric sharks," he explained. "Scientists calculate that the jaws to which these teeth belonged must have been able to devour prey six feet in diameter. As for the bodies, they must have measured anything from a hundred and thirty to a hundred and sixty feet long! Present-day sharks nearest to this in size are the pilgrim shark and the whale-shark: both of these average from forty to fifty feet in length. They have tiny teeth and are quite harmless. The pilgrim lives mostly at great depths, and its skin is of no commercial value, being about four inches thick."

THE DISAPPOINTING WHALE-SHARK

These sharks are rarely caught.* Mayo told me that in forty years he had seen only four or five whale-sharks. The last occasion had been some years before, near Santiago de Cuba. At that time some of the town's refuse was regularly tipped into the sea at a certain place, and there one had a close view of four or five sharks at a time. It was quite a little shark-preserve. One day a forty-six-foot shark was harpooned there, and exhibited for some hours in the streets of Santiago. The whole population filed past it, but were disappointed; the jaws indeed were huge, but the teeth in them no bigger than a baby's.

* Pilgrim-sharks are regularly caught off the Breton coast. Their flesh is treated to make poultry-food.



CHAPTER SIX

WHENEVER we brought Mayo any sharks he regarded them from a purely commercial angle, and calculated what they would fetch: so much for the skin, so much for the liver, the flesh, and the fins; and he would be right to within a dollar. Sometimes he seemed tempted to feel them with his hands, which deprived them of a little of their prestige.

After watching Mayo pack them head-to-tail in the van like sardines I was inclined to forget that it was to these monsters that seamen of other days had given the name of *requins*, because their advent reminded them of the prayer for the dead: the requiem.

Every morning Mayo went the rounds of his suppliers with the van. As the fishermen of Cojimar had their own factory, the men he visited were mainly those who worked on their own; which meant that his journeys took him along the coast up to twenty-five or thirty miles from Havana. He carried stores for the fishermen and some-

SANDRILLIO'S LOST HAND

times brought back one or two with him; and this was how we met Sandrillio.

Sandrillio fished about twenty-five miles from Havana, in the Cojimar direction. He worked in the daytime, according to a method which he told us was his own. His boat was equipped with a sort of gallows-shaped mast, from which he lowered a huge piece of rotten meat to a few inches below the surface of the sea.

When the sharks appeared and began devouring the bait he harpooned them, after which the meat was hoisted by block and tackle out of reach of any others. In this way Sandrillio brought in half a dozen by eleven o'clock each morning.

This gnarled, wiry little man, who was about fifty and slightly hunchbacked, had black eyes of extraordinary beauty. In place of his left hand he had an iron hook: the result of an adventure some years before. A small shark which he had just hoisted aboard, thinking he had killed it, bit his hand. In so doing the creature died, but the wound became infected and Sandrillio had to have the hand amputated at the hospital in Havana.

The day Mayo brought him, he had come to town to do some shopping. He knew Bloem and had fished with him, and he invited us to spend a day or two at his house.

He lived on the coast in an isolated wooden shack which he shared with his nephew and assistant, a boy of about twelve. When a shark was harpooned it was this nephew Tino who hoisted the bait out of the water; and it was he, too, who baited the hooks on the nights when Sandrillio went out after swordfish or tuna.

Tino had lost his parents a few years earlier in a motor-coach accident. Sandrillio adopted him and decided to

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

make a fisherman of him. In another three or four years the boy would be strong enough to land his own sharks.

With the method employed by Sandrillio, bringing the catch alongside required far more effort than was needed for the Cojimar type of angling. It was all very well for him to be a good shot with a harpoon—good enough to pierce a playing-card twenty feet away—but sometimes his weapon made only a superficial wound, and then a frantic tussle ensued. Often his boat was towed for hundreds of yards; often indeed, finding himself being dragged out to sea, Sandrillio was compelled to cut the line.

The first thing Bloem did on arriving was to examine the harpoons; these were long iron bars fitted into a wooden shaft. The point was shaped like an arrow-head and sharpened to razor-keenness.

As he was weighing them in his hands I looked at the little sandy beach in front of Sandrillio's shack. It was a glorious day—the first for a very long time that did not seem to belong to the tropics. It was like a calm, cool summer morning on the Côte d'Azur, and I felt like lying down on the beach for a nap. But there was no hope of this, for already Sandrillio was getting the boat ready. He put in half a dozen harpoons and half the carcass of a horse. An hour later we were three or four miles from shore. Tino had caught two *dorao*, which would form the main part of our lunch. This greenish fish, whose real name I never knew and never shall know, was amazingly voracious; hardly had Tino cast his line—clumsily baited with a piece of fish—when the two specimens swimming alongside dashed at the hook as if they had eaten nothing for a fortnight.

In less than thirty seconds they were both aboard. One

A BLUE SHARK AT LIBERTY

was three feet long with a big wound, scarcely healed, near the head, inflicted by a barracuda or a shark.

When we were six miles from shore, Sandrillio stopped the engine and slung the great piece of meat from the arm of the gallows. At that moment, somewhere in the underwater caverns below us, sounded the death-knell that the shark-god of the Caribbean tolls whenever sharks are to die. And the waiting began. Always this waiting. Bloem had dragged me out of bed as if the hotel were on fire, we had careered at sixty miles an hour along the Cojimar road in his Ford—and now we had to wait. And we went on waiting, for hours.

Drop by drop the blood dripped from the smelly carcase, and mingled with the clear, blue waters; there was not a ripple on the sea, not a cloud in the sky. Behind us the coast drew a garish line of ochre across the landscape, beneath the foliage of banana-trees and flamboyants.

At last, about midday, after we had changed our position three or four times, the first shark appeared. Up to then I had never had the chance of seeing one at liberty; this one swam so close to us that by leaning over the water I could have touched it with my hand—and lost my arm.

It was a fascinating sight: a display of matchless suppleness and speed. The creature darted at the bait and then, with the slightest twitch of its tail, whirled about in an instant; it withdrew and then returned, seemed to hesitate, and smelt the bait without touching it.

This went on for about a minute; then the shark vanished into the depths. It was a blue shark, about twelve feet long; a splendid creature with beautiful lines. It looked as if it were made of metal—a strange and terrifying toy propelled by an unseen motor. Sandrillio glanced at me and smiled.



"He'll come back," he said. "He'll come back with a couple of pals, and they'll have lunch together."

For that was usually what happened. One shark would turn up at the bait and disappear without touching it, to return later with others of his kind. What expert in the

A BLUE SHARK CAUGHT

ways of fish will ever learn the mysterious councils held by sharks in the deep?

There were three of them, and they hurled themselves at the bait together. Within a few seconds the water was dyed red for three or four feet all round them, and the boat began dancing on the surface. With a harpoon in his right hand and his iron hook round the gallows-mast, Sandrillio awaited the moment to strike.

I never saw the harpoon go; I saw the line whizzing out from the coil at his feet and the wounded shark going down. Sandrillio had only one arm with which to haul in his catch, and he did so by bringing in the line a yard at a time and holding it with his foot.

One could see how great an effort this operation demanded of a one-armed man by looking at the mast to which he clung with his hook: the wood at that point was deeply grooved. In a few minutes the shark was alongside. Sandrillio bent over it with a big butcher's knife in his hand; he drove it quickly into the shark's back to



SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

paralyse it, and finished it off with a spear-thrust in the eye.

By two o'clock in the afternoon five sharks lay in a row at the bottom of the boat. Sandrillio had harpooned three, Bloem two, and I had missed one.

The hunt began again at four o'clock. When evening came three more sharks joined the five we had caught in the morning. As Sandrillio threw them on to the beach, two tiny fish detached themselves from one of them and fell to the ground. On the head of each of these there was a sort of flat disc with ridges running across it: a sucker. The fish were remoras, the pilot-fish that cling to the shark's throat and, it is said, help him to steer.

"The opinion of the experts is divided on that point," Bloem remarked. "I personally agree with those who say that the remora is just a parasite—a sort of scrounger that sticks itself to the shark to catch the crumbs of its feast."

It takes an incredible amount of force to detach the remora from its host. The natives of Polynesia use it as a living hook to catch turtles. They fasten a line to its tail and cast it into the water where the turtles are; it fastens on to one, and all the men have to do is to haul fish and turtle in.

One of the greatest shark-fishers, William Young, who devoted more than thirty years of his life to catching shark in all the seas of the world, relates the following incident which he witnessed at an aquarium containing some of these great fish. The keeper, sitting in a boat in the pool, fastened a line to the tail of a remora and let the fish attach itself to one of them. Then hauling on the line he pulled out a five-foot shark, passed it across the boat, and dropped it in again on the other side.

THE REMORA

That evening, after our first day of fishing with the harpoon, we dined very late. We sat on the terrace forming an extension of Sandrillio's house and projecting over the rocks. Beyond the fringe of phosphorescent surf, lights were being lit one by one on the calm sea. The fishermen of Cojimar were starting their shift.

Tino cleared the table and extinguished the oil-lamp, round which insects were buzzing. Bloem sat down in a rocking-chair and smoked in silence. Sandrillio squatted in a corner of the terrace, his back against the balustrade and his elbows on his knees, gazing at the sea.

The night was marvellously still. Below us the patches of white sand between the rocks gave this tropical landscape the look of a snow-scene.

Tino sat down near us, and I smoked and chatted to Sandrillio. He had arrived in Cuba from Spain at the age of twenty, and worked for some years in a sugar-cane plantation. It wasn't until seven or eight years later that he took up fishing. At that time sharkskin fetched little. The leather made from it was coarse, and the company for which Sandrillio worked hunted shark mainly for the liver-oil and the fins (the latter were sold to the Chinese). Then he came to Havana to fish on his own account, and had settled on this part of the coast.

"There was nothing here then but rocks," he said. "Nothing but rocks and sand, señor, and I built this house with my own hands. That was before my accident," he added, indicating his iron hook. "I couldn't do it now. And then Tino came to live with me."

I expressed surprise that he had not settled in Cojimar. He made a vague gesture.

"There would have been problems," he said. "Here there are no problems—and then I like being alone."

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He went on to say that later on he hoped to settle in Havana. He would buy a proper boat, a twenty-footer with sails and an engine, and he would fish only for pleasure.

The next day, too, was spent in fishing, and at night-fall we left Sandrillio and returned to Havana. He walked a little way along the road with us to where the Ford was parked, and I can still see the hunchbacked little man hopping along in the last rays of the sun and raising his iron hook in farewell; I can still hear his last words: "In five years, señor, you'll have to ask for Sandrillio in the harbour . . . a real fishing-trip with a real boat . . . *quién sabe?*"

We learned of the accident less than a week later, when we returned from a day's fishing aboard the *Shark*. It was Mayo who told us that Sandrillio had been in Havana hospital since the middle of the morning and was unlikely to live.

We were not allowed to see him. Tino told us that they had gone out fishing as usual at six in the morning. A shark no bigger than those they usually caught had dashed at the bait, but instead of tearing a piece off it had tried to drag the whole thing down. This had happened before, and Tino had dealt with it by running out some line and then jerking the bait sharply from the jaws of the shark.

This time he had acted too hastily: in making a dash for the mast to hoist the carcass out of the water he had bumped into Sandrillio and knocked him overboard.

It all happened in a few seconds: Tino saw the water turn red round Sandrillio's body, and when he succeeded in dragging him on board it was to find that the man had a big wound at his hip. He made for the shore at once, but

SANDRILLIO'S FUNERAL

by the time he got him to Havana—after stopping the first car that passed along that deserted part of the coast and putting the injured man into it—Sandrillio had lost nearly all his blood.

When we left the hospital the surgeon who had operated on Sandrillio held out no hope. Sandrillio died at eleven o'clock next morning.

He was buried next day in a patch of ground behind his house. Tino spent the hours preceding the funeral in the port of Havana, still wearing the clothes he had had on at the time of the disaster: blue canvas trousers and a white shirt patched with many different colours. The shirt was still stained with blood. He seemed in a daze, and entered the German's Ford like a sleep-walker, to follow the hospital's motor-hearse along the Cojimar road.

There were only two wreaths on the coffin, one from Mayo and the other from Bloem. Apart from Tino, Sandrillio left no relatives and probably few friends. At Cojimar they barely knew him by name.

Yet when we arrived, about fifteen fishermen had gathered at the house, some in blue cotton suits freshly washed and ironed. I recognised Romilio, Alvarez, and Ramirez, who formed a silent group some yards from the place where the grave had been dug.

All was over in under half an hour. The fishermen piled into the van which had brought them—it belonged to the butcher of Cojimar—while Bloem, Mayo, Tino, and I entered the Ford.

Just as the car was moving off, Tino seemed to emerge from his torpor, and raising himself on the seat, he took a long look at the house and the sandy beach. Now, for the first and last time, I saw tears in his eyes.

During the next few days he seemed to be adapting

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himself to his new life as if nothing had happened. Bloem took him in temporarily, and asked his old servant, whom he never saw, to look after the boy. Later he showed Tino where his boat was moored and what work he would have to do every day.

One person was glad of what had happened, and that was Chato, the fifteen-year-old negro boy who took the helm of the *Shark* when Bloem went fishing, and never knew what to do with himself when ashore.

The following week Sandrillio's house was sold, and unsuccessful attempts were made to sell his boat too. Neither the buyer of the house nor any of the fishermen of Cojimar, who might have been interested, showed any inclination to bargain for her.

"Superstition," said Bloem. "They don't want a boat that has caused a man's death."

So the craft was anchored in a corner of the harbour, awaiting the day when it could be repainted and sold. And the curtain fell on the death of the little man with the iron hook.



CHAPTER SEVEN

THE week after Sandrillio's death I made up my mind to leave Havana. But where should I go? My efforts to discover the methods of shark-fishing used in other parts of the Caribbean had met with little success. Strange as it may seem, nothing definite was known about them. Shark-fishing went on almost everywhere, in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Martinique, Dominica, and even as far away as Barthélemy near Guadeloupe, a little island inhabited exclusively by the descendants of Breton pirates. But as for knowing how it was done in these places, neither the fishermen of Cojimar—whom I saw again two or three times—nor those in the port of Havana, nor Roca, nor Bloem himself could tell me anything precise.

Should it be Haiti or St Barthélemy? For in the end I decided to limit my plans to one or other of those two places.

Haiti had the advantage of being near. A day's journey by bus would take me from Havana to Santiago de Cuba, where I could take ship for Port au Prince. But St Barthélemy is in one respect unique. It is peopled by freaks.

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

When privateering ceased to be a lawful activity a number of Breton ex-pirates settled in the island with their families, chased out the negro inhabitants, and began to cultivate the soil. They had no contact with neighbouring islands, and inbreeding had its inevitable consequences. The race became almost entirely degenerate, so that the children of the Cha-Chas (the present inhabitants) are born with huge, dropsical heads, webbed fingers, or toothless gums.

These creatures must have had their own peculiar methods of catching sharks, but I soon found that short of chartering my own boat I had no more chance of reaching St Barthélemy than of landing in the moon. So I had almost decided to sail for Haiti, when by chance I met Señora Da Mora.

Some weeks earlier I had met an elegant and dapper Cuban named Romilio, whose chief occupation was to spend as entertainingly as possible the income from a small sugar-cane plantation which he had inherited from his father. He knocked at my door one morning and invited me to go with him to a reception to be held that evening at Vedado, the Neuilly of Havana.

It was a gorgeous affair. In a garden almost the size of the Esplanade des Invalides, more than two hundred guests were strolling among the flamboyants, waited upon by footmen in black-and-gold livery. Seats had been placed here and there among the tropical shrubs, and it was on one of them that Señora Da Mora was sitting: an old lady, dressed in a long, severe black gown, who was to give an unexpected turn to my journey.

She was sipping one of the typical Cuban cocktails, a *dai-kiri* composed of white rum and crushed ice, in a glass which she twirled slowly in her fingers at eye-level.

DOUBLE THE PRICE IN FLORIDA

Romilio took my arm, approached the old lady, and halted barely a yard behind her. She never even turned her head.

"La Señora Da Mora," announced Romilio in a loud voice. "Deaf as a post. But one of the richest people in the island."

Next moment we were seated beside her. I now learned that the señora had been married to the owner of some of the largest coffee-plantations in Cuba, and of a number of boat-building yards.

"Some years ago," said Romilio, "she bought a little shark-fishery and put a friend of hers in to run it, as a favour to him. She has never even seen the place herself."

He turned to the old lady, spoke to her for a few moments in Spanish, and then said to me:

"La señora says you may spend a few days there if you would care to. The manager of the fishery is staying in Havana just now. His name is Señor Hornez. Ask for him at the International Hotel, and mention the señora's name."

Two days later I was standing before Señor Hornez. He was a little man with kindly Spanish eyes, long, black, curly hair, and a delicate moustache which formed two melancholy commas, one on each side of his mouth. He told me that he was going back to the fishery next day and would be delighted to take me with him.

The place was about thirty miles from Havana, on the coast nearest to America. This was important, for it was to the United States that two-thirds of the catch was exported, the remaining third being processed in Cuba itself. "I sell at double the price in Florida," Hornez explained.

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

As we were driving along the sun-flooded coast, he told me briefly how the fishery operated. Seven men, himself included, worked for Señora Da Mora. The boat that carried the sharks to Port Everglades in Florida was a forty-footer called the *Lucania*; she did the return trip twice a week. Fishing was done with both net and line.

These nets were not of heavy steel mesh (the only sort that I imagined would be capable of standing up to the bites and leaps of creatures weighing many hundred pounds), but of hemp or cotton; they were about 175 feet long and were lowered vertically into the sea.

"There's no need for anything stronger," Hornez told me. "As soon as the shark comes up against the net it catches its pectoral fins in the lozenge-shaped mesh; and as it can't move backwards—if it could it might get free—it rolls over and over getting more and more entangled, until in the end the net gets wrapped round the gills and it suffocates. Most of those we bring up are dead by early morning."

I also learned that besides the *Lucania* the fishery possessed only three boats, and that Antonio paid his men a percentage on the catch.

"If I didn't do this," he said, "they'd sit down in the boat as soon as they were out of sight, and play cards."

We arrived at the fishery a little before midday. It consisted merely of two long huts side by side on the sand where the men ate and slept, a little wooden jetty, and a huge refrigerated vat in which Hornez preserved the sharks that were to be put aboard the *Lucania*. By this hour of the day all the men had returned; two of them were just unloading the last boat. Three others squatted in the shade of a hut. On seeing me, they stopped chatting

BOREDOM IN THE WILD-BEAST HUT

and watched me with feigned indifference. Perhaps they took me for an inspector of fisheries.

The hut where I was to sleep smelt like the wild-beast section of the zoo. Two other beds, a table covered with fishing-tackle, and a few benches completed the furnishings. Hornez put down my case in a corner and said: "After a couple of days you won't notice the smell."

Next he introduced his men: five hairy fellows in patched and faded clothes, who seemed not to have washed or shaved for a fortnight. Five characters out of *Treasure Island*: Ruiz, Ortega, Sanchez, Fernando, and Torial.

Among these buccaneers with their menagerie smell was a dapper little Spaniard, newly arrived in Cuba, freshly washed and ironed, who answered to the singular name of Raimondo Delacour.

As soon as they learned the reason for my visit their faces cleared and they came up one by one to shake hands. Delacour fetched a bottle of wine, which was at once opened.

That was all. The stir of curiosity roused by my arrival lasted only a quarter of an hour. Most of the men stretched themselves out in the shade of the shacks and dozed off. After ten o'clock in the morning, the hour at which they usually brought in their nets, a dull, empty day lay ahead of them, which they spent in sleeping or playing cards. At eight in the evening they went out again to cast their nets.

It was when they had done this that they baited their lines. (That is, if the lure of a few extra dollars was stronger than their sleepiness or sloth.)

Two hours after my arrival, just as we were finishing lunch, one of the men picked something up from the sand at the place where the catch was laid out in a row every morning and handed it to Antonio Hornez. It was a tiny

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

shoe, a baby's shoe, shapeless and colourless, and looking as if it had been through a rolling-mill.

A shark had vomited it up that morning, the man said, just as they were throwing it on to the sand. Hornez turned the shoe over and over in his fingers.

"I'd like to know just where the brute found it," he said dreamily. "I wonder every time . . . I'd like to be able to write the history of the remains we find in the stomachs of these beasts. What a book it would make! Why, señor, a year ago—it was when we were still butchering the sharks ourselves instead of sending them off whole—I found an enormous diamond inside a blue shark; it was set in a ring which seemed to me to be of platinum. Madre de Dios! I thought my fortune was made. I jumped into my car and dashed off to Havana to show it to a jeweller. But the ring was only silver, and the stone was imitation.

"Another day I found a man's hand; it was all in one piece and wrinkled by sea-water. The remains of a jacket-sleeve were rolled round the arm, which had been severed just above the elbow. Every time we find human remains we have to take them at once to the police. I did this; they put the arm into formaldehyde and told me they would open the inquiry that day. These inquiries always begin in the same way. The police draw up a list of people who have disappeared within the last few days, and compare the descriptions with what has been found. This time it appeared that the only person registered as missing during the past week was a rich American, a certain John Filber, who had taken off from Miami for Nicaragua in a small plane he was piloting himself. It was presumed that he had come down in the Caribbean. The police were going to send the exhibit to Miami, but I offered to take

JOHN FILBER'S HAND

it myself. As the *Lucania* sailed twice a week for Florida it was easy enough.

"It was John Filber's hand. The material wound round the forearm made it possible to identify it. He had only distant relatives, and now that proof of death had been established they came into a good-sized fortune."

"A month later," Hornez ended, "I received a letter at the fishery, posted in Miami. A stranger had written to thank me for bringing the evidence of the death of 'poor John Filber' and to say that he would like to compensate me for my trouble. Enclosed was a cheque for a thousand dollars."

I spent my first afternoon at the fishery sitting in the shade of a rock, talking to Antonio Hornez and sipping little glasses of white rum. Round us, exhausted by the heat, the men slept, their caps pulled down over their eyes to protect them from the sun and the flies. The boats moored along the jetty seemed petrified on a sea of glittering quicksilver. There was not a breath of wind.

A year earlier, Hornez told me, when he took over the management of the fishery, the men used to bring in as many as fifty sharks a day. "The figures have dropped," he added, "and we shall have to think about moving to another part of the coast." (It was for this reason that the buildings were of such a temporary kind. Less than two days were needed to dismantle everything, pack up, and move on somewhere else.)

In this same cove, some weeks after his arrival, Hornez had attempted an unusual thing: shark-hunting with dynamite. A friend of his, a military pilot who had been making low-altitude flights over the Caribbean for a long time, had noticed that in sunny weather, where the water

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

was clear, sharks could be seen swimming at a depth of twenty or thirty fathoms. It was he who suggested using explosives, but the plan soon proved useless. Ordinary fish, whose swimming-bladders are full of air, rise to the surface after an explosion; the shark falls like lead. One can no more fish for shark with dynamite than with a rifle.

Soon after sunset the men emerged from their torpor and began to busy themselves with their boats. After dinner I embarked with Hornez and Ortega. The latter was both fisherman and cook. He was also as hairy as a monkey and the size of an iceberg, and would have made a small fortune in Hollywood in a modern version of King Kong. His hands especially were like table-tennis racquets. About ten miles off-shore he slowed the engine, and in less than half an hour our five nets (each craft had five) were cast into the water. King Kong then took the tiller again, stopped the boat a few hundred yards further on, and began to "do his marketing."

He started by hanging a net about six feet square vertically between two poles aft. Then he hung a powerful electric lamp in the middle of the net, sat down and lit a cigarette, indicating by a grunt that there was now nothing to do but wait. We waited ten minutes, and then noticed a series of little bumps against the net. Attracted by the light, flocks of flying-fish were dashing into it and falling at our feet. (I was to find that they tasted only very remotely like *truite au bleu*. But whenever King Kong decided to give it us, we were at least sure of not eating shark. And that was always something.)

Next day at dawn I watched nets being hauled in for the first time. There was an average of two sharks in each; most of them were dead, rolled up in their cotton



SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

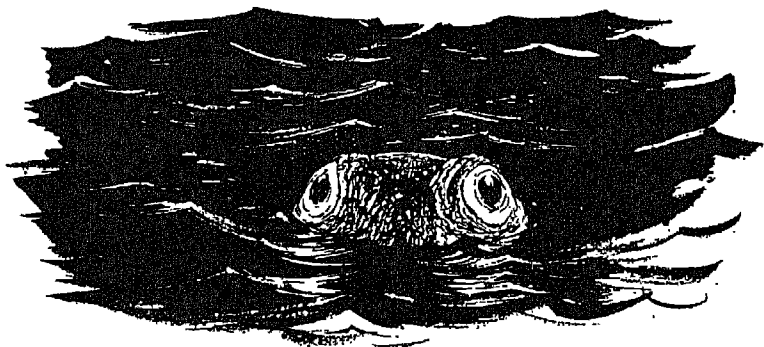
snare as in a shroud. Each boat was equipped with a sort of primitive crane to hoist both the shark and the part of the net nearest to it aboard. First the shark was unhooked, then the net. This recovery presented no real difficulty except on the rare occasions when two sharks were caught in the same net only a short distance apart. If they were not already dead when brought aboard, there was a risk of their attacking and devouring each other; and when this happened, the men lost not only the sharks but some square yards of net as well.

Antonio Hornez told me that sharks suffer little from the wounds inflicted by their own kind, which explains their resistance to injuries which to us appear necessarily fatal.

Some days before, as he was trying to hoist two of these monsters aboard, the bigger one attacked the smaller and managed to get the end of its body into its mouth. The men tried to make it let go, but in vain; they had first to disembowel it and literally cut it in half with a shovel they had on board.

I never saw an incident of this kind. The expeditions in which I took part during the following days merely accustomed me to the rhythm of the work, which never varied. Every morning we put to sea at dawn and returned between nine o'clock and ten. We put about twenty sharks into the refrigerated vat. Then we tried to kill time. The fearsome smell prevailing in the shacks soon ceased to bother me, and I gave up looking at the huge cake of soap that lay like a relic in one of the huts, and wishing that someone would use it.

After ten days or so of this I was beginning to think about returning to Havana, when the prelude occurred to the strange event which, a week later, was to be front-page news in every Cuban paper.



CHAPTER EIGHT

AT eight o'clock in the evening of that day, the sky became covered with dense black clouds, giving warning of an approaching thunderstorm. As the sea remained as calm as a duck-pond, we went to cast our nets, returning at about ten. Sanchez, who had stayed at the fishery during our absence, decided to put out in his turn to set some lines, while the rest of us sat down for a game of poker.

At midnight, as we were finishing, we heard the roar of an engine, telling us that Sanchez was coming in. This was unusual, for on the rare evenings when he went out with his lines he never came back before four or five in the morning. We went out on to the beach as he came alongside the jetty. There was still not a breath of air, and stars could be seen through the rifts in the clouds. It was not the storm that had forced Sanchez to return.

He jumped on to the sand and came towards us, carrying two of his lines coiled in his hands. When he showed them to us we saw that they had no hooks on them. They had been severed cleanly a few inches from the end of the wire trace.

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This was not unusual. But one had only to look at Sanchez to see that something extraordinary had happened. This stocky, short-legged little man, whose enormous neck looked as if it had been set crookedly on his shoulders, usually spoke slowly, searching for words which he seemed to drag painfully from his very depths. That evening he almost gabbled, with something stunned in his look. And we learned this:

An hour after putting out, Sanchez stopped his boat about ten miles from shore and began angling in a manner similar to that of the Cojimar fishermen: that is to say he laid out six lines, attached in pairs to big white buoys; then lit a cigarette and waited.

Despite the thunderstorm that threatened to break, the night remained clear enough for him to see his floats without the help of a searchlight; and he was only a few yards away from them. Round him the sea was only just stirring, moved by a long and barely perceptible swell.

At that part of the sea, where the depth was estimated at about fifty-five fathoms, sharks weighing 500 lbs had often been caught; and as the overcast sky gave additional reason to hope for a good catch, Sanchez felt sure the night would not be wasted.

When the first buoy sank he reached it in ten seconds, and tested the two lines that were fastened to it. A big fish had taken the bait.

Sanchez knew this by a sort of long, slow drag which he could feel right up in his shoulders. But it was neither a shark nor any of the other creatures that he was used to finding on his line or in his net. The buoy had not dived suddenly to about three feet below the surface; it sank slowly and without jerks. Nor was it the wild, spasmodic leaps of a shark that Sanchez felt; indeed, after the first

few seconds he felt nothing. The line no longer moved, and seemed to be held by a monster lying motionless on the sea-bed.

"I stayed like that a good ten seconds," he told us. "Then it struck me that the line might have fouled a rock, and that I was doing the pulling, helped by the drift of the boat. I gave a sharp tug, but couldn't get in more than a few inches of line. Then the pulling began again. . . ."

At that moment a shudder ran along the line. Sanchez realised that his hook had not caught on a rock but in a living and incredibly heavy mass. Bracing himself in the boat, he seized the line with both hands and hauled with all his strength.

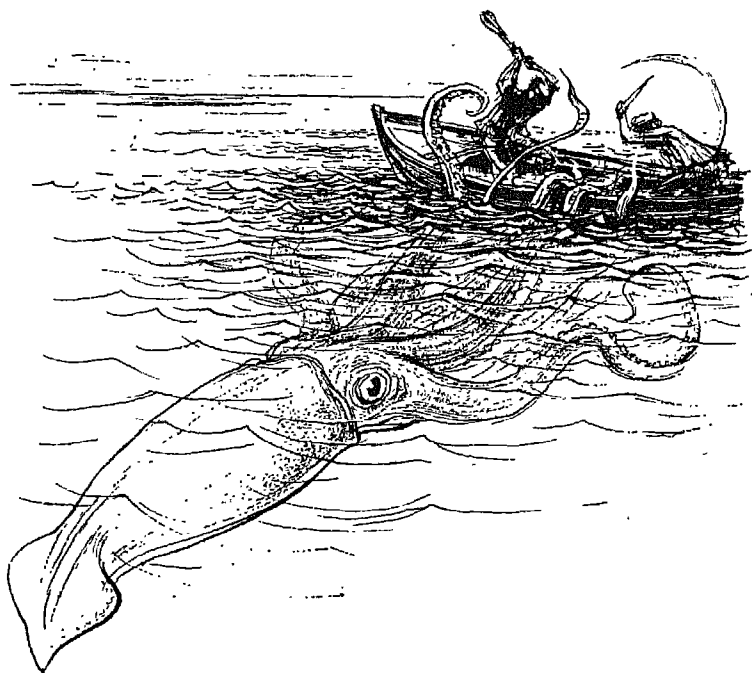
"For a few seconds I seemed to be dragging something huge out of the depths. Then I found myself flat in the bottom of the boat, holding a broken line. . . ."

Getting up again, he seized his searchlight and swept its beam over the water all round him. "But there was nothing but the black, empty sea," he said. "The buoys were moving no more than if they'd been stuck into tar. I waited like that for a bit, with the light focused on them—and then another float went down. . . ."

It went equally slowly, moved by the same mystifying drag. Sanchez seized the second line, and that, too, parted like the first.

"Then I started up the engine," he said, "and came back."

For some seconds the men looked at each other in silence. Hornez still had his poker-cards in his hand. He slipped them mechanically into his pocket, and then remarked that the thing could only have been a huge octopus. Sanchez made a vague gesture.



"I thought of that," he said. "But I don't think so." He added that he had caught big octopus before now; one day he hooked one "with tentacles at least thirteen feet long," and he had had all the trouble in the world getting rid of it, realising that he had no hope of killing such a monster or of hoisting it aboard without capsizing his boat. "No, no," he said. "An octopus wouldn't have pulled like that." Hornez added that unless they were to believe it was some unknown monster, that was the only explanation. He would go out himself next day and try angling at the same spot. . . .

I watched the men as they stood in a ring round Sanchez, and saw that Hornez' explanation did not satisfy any of them. Sanchez had been fishing in the Caribbean for twenty years, and if he said "an octopus wouldn't have pulled like that," then it was not an octopus.

They handed the broken lines from one to another,

I REGRETTED IT INSTANTLY

turning them in their fingers; and for some minutes this group of bearded men, under the big lamp which made their shadows play over the sand, looked as if they were examining some mysterious machine fallen from another planet. Hornez went to bed, but I stayed talking the thing over with the men until a late hour.

The menacing storm, which still would not break, had charged the atmosphere with electricity, and it was impossible to sleep in the shack. I took a blanket and spread it on the sand. Three of the men did the same, and again we tried to sleep. But sleep eluded me. After some time Ortega raised himself on his elbow:

"Hornez said he'd go fishing there himself tomorrow. But tomorrow will be too late." Turning to me, he said in bad English, "What do you think, Frenchman?" It seemed to me that Sanchez was waiting for just such a suggestion. To return there on his own did not appeal to him, but if someone would go with him. . . . "We could go there right away," I said. And regretted it instantly. The idea was perfectly mad. If indeed Sanchez had been the victim of some hallucination, and had hooked only a huge octopus, we should have had the trouble for nothing. But if, on the other hand, by some extraordinary chance it really was an unknown monster, it would take more than three men in a twelve-foot boat to deal with it. I surveyed the night and found it exceedingly sinister. Big, dark clouds were jostling one another over the sea; on the horizon, long flashes of lightning striped the sky every ten seconds.

At the point where Sanchez had laid out two lines we dropped a dozen; Ortega had brought a big flare which he fixed upright in the stern of his boat, and for more than an

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hour we moved our searchlight beams over the water, focusing them on the floats, but not one of them moved. Next morning Hornez tried, with no better success. During the next three days the men made a few more attempts, but the alleged monster had permanently vanished into the depths.

It was then it happened: the event that was to focus the attention of the whole Cuban press on our fishery.

Delacour, the Spaniard who had recently landed in Cuba and whom Hornez had engaged some months before, had just set out his lines. It was a little past midnight. His three hollow metal buoys which served as floats were bobbing about thirty yards from his boat. Two lines were fastened to each, and went down to a depth of fifty fathoms or so. The buoys and tackle were attached to the boat by a line the thickness of one's finger.

When the first buoy dipped, pulled under with exceptional force, Delacour supposed that he had a shark of unusual size to deal with; but hardly had he started up his engine when the two other buoys disappeared; the line to the boat went suddenly taut and towed her at great speed into the darkness. The man had the presence of mind to cut the rope, and this alone saved him from capsizing.

A few seconds later the sea was once more entirely still. Delacour searched the night with his light, but not one of his three buoys had regained the surface. They were found two days later, some miles from the place where they had vanished. They looked as if they had been hit with hammers. Two had been literally flattened, like plates; this was the result of the pressure of the water at the extraordinary depth to which they must have been dragged.

MANTA OR CACHALOT?

Two out of the six lines were still attached to them, intact. A third had been cut about three feet from the hook, and in a manner which intrigued us more than anything else. It was not a clean break, such as occurred when there had been a violent tug, or a bite. This line seemed to have been abraded, and the end of it frayed in one's fingers.

No shark could have done that. Certainly no shark would have had the strength to drag the buoys to that depth and at such a speed. Hornez himself, who had shown a certain scepticism after Sanchez' adventure, seemed now to be really shaken.

There were two possible explanations. Only two kinds of creature could have dragged the floats to that depth. One was the manta ray—a specimen about the size of the one I had glimpsed off Cojimar. The other was the cachalot whale. "But I've never heard of any cachalots in these parts," Antonio Hornez told me. "And I've never heard of manta rays dashing at a hook like that."

Indeed, there was but a step between the two mysterious events at the fishery, and Hornez himself was now taking that step.

Next day, three of the fishermen set off for Havana. It was Saturday, the only day of the week when they consented to wash before climbing into the truck. They drove straight to certain taverns, known only to them, where they went on their tremendous weekly blinds. On Monday morning they returned, having apparently slept little and talked much. A representative of one of the Cuban dailies, *El Diario Nacional*, was with them. He spent the day at the fishery; and two days later fifty thousand Cubans learned as they ate their breakfast that a huge monster was roaming round the island at a depth of 100-150 fathoms.

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The article was on the front page. Above a photograph of Raimondo Delacour and his battered buoys, a headline stated that a fish of exceptional size was "striking terror" to all at El Suerto fishery and that it was "a monster of an unknown species." The article ended with a pronouncement by a Cuban expert in underwater exploration, which may be summed up as follows:

"It would be foolish to assume that we know all the species of monsters that inhabit the bottom of the sea. There may be specimens living at great depths whose size and strength we do not even suspect. It is possible that the one at El Suerto is one of these."

The fishermen passed the paper to each other, commenting on it with wags of the head. The expert's words impressed them. Up to then they had had their doubts; but the sight of this written in the paper was to them almost like seeing the tail of the monster itself. And they began to cast strange glances at the sea.

Other journalists arrived in the course of the next few days. Then came the sight-seers. Some stopped their cars at the side of the road overlooking the cove, and after strolling a little and staring at the fishery under the broiling sun, drove on. Others came down to chat to the men. In Havana people were talking of nothing else, they said, and all Cuba knew about it. Sanchez and Delacour became people of importance.

As no monster appeared, fishing continued, though without any real enthusiasm. In the evenings, when the nets had been cast, the fishermen instead of playing cards sat on the sand and told each other wild stories.

They talked of the gigantic octopuses of the Caribbean, measuring fifty feet across and capable of dragging down a twenty-foot boat, or even seizing a man in a single

TALES OF MONSTERS

tentacle and drowning him. These creatures never surfaced, they said, except on certain nights when the moon was full; then they floated for a few minutes, their phosphorescent eyes on a level with the water. These beasts moved with the speed of a shark, attacked everything within reach of their tentacles and feared but one enemy: the cachalot. Cases were cited of captured whales whose bodies still bore traces of suckers the size of No Entry signs.

Torial, who came from Santiago de Cuba and who had worked for some years in Mexican bull-rings before taking up fishing, said that off certain desolate coasts in Mexico monsters appeared which had never been accurately described, as no one had ever come within a mile of them. They had a huge cylindrical body striped with yellow, and tentacles something like those of an octopus. Whenever one of them was reported off-shore the fishermen refused to put to sea for days.

In Cuba itself, near Santiago, a machine-gun had been fired from the top of a fort at an unknown animal which had surfaced a few score yards from shore. The bullets seemed not to trouble it in the least: it had turned round and round two or three times, and then disappeared in a leisurely manner.

And so the stories went on.

These discussions sometimes lasted until dawn, accompanied by many little glasses of white rum. They did nothing to solve the mystery, but produced their inevitable effect: a feeling of uneasiness.

Through the night, at hours when they were usually snoring, the men walked about the beach gazing at the sea. One evening when I had gone to bed in a high fever—the result of jabbing myself on a hook that same

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

morning—I suddenly had the sensation of something enormous—something long and limp—sliding over the sand, and of a tentacle stealing through the half-open door and touching my shoulder. I woke with a start, soaked with sweat. Ortega had laid his hand on me and was holding out a bottle of aspirin.

“Take some of this in rum,” he said. “It kills nightmares.”

I got up and walked a few paces over the sand. No monster was stirring there, except for some huge crabs that were slipping along sideways before plunging into the fringe of the surf. No unknown monsters appeared during the days that followed, and the sight-seers melted away.

The flattened buoys were left on the shore for a few more days and then stowed away at the back of a shed.

The day I left the fishery Antonio Hornez came a little way along the road with me, while the men were loading the truck that was to make the run to Havana.

“Leave me your address,” he said, as we shook hands. “If we ever get to the bottom of this mystery I’ll write to you.”

I’m still waiting for that letter.



CHAPTER NINE

IN all the Caribbean, there is no country with a history so full of tales and dramatic events as the little republic of Haiti.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, soon after the Treaty of Ryswick (1697), which gave this colony to France, the majority of the French who settled in the island were aristocrats who came to seek their fortunes in the tropics; they cleared and dug plantations and imported battalions of black slaves from Africa.

Within a few tens of years colossal fortunes were made. At Versailles, the *grands seigneurs de Saint-Domingue* (for that was then the name of the colony) surpassed those of Martinique in magnificence.

With the outbreak of the French Revolution, the colony became disturbed. At a period when voices in France were raised for the first time in favour of the emancipation of the slaves, a negro named Boukman from Jamaica, who was six foot eight inches tall, gathered together some hundreds of slaves and harangued them all

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

one night. At daybreak the massacre began. The negroes scattered among the plantations, cutting the throats of the colonists and burning their houses. This hideous carnage continued for a week. Frenchmen were disembowelled with spades, their eyes were put out, they were sawn in two. Meanwhile, in the Bahamas, British colonists were wondering why the sky on the horizon was so red. . . .

The National Assembly sent troops to quell the rising; they were driven back into the northern part of the island and roughly handled by local forces under the command of a negro who, according to an old tradition, was descended from Gaou-Guinou, a king of the Guinea coast. His name was Toussaint Louverture.

In 1794 Louverture proclaimed the abolition of slavery, and forced the French governor to leave the colony. He beat the rebellious mulattos in the south of the island, where a rift had formed between blacks and half-breeds, and finally organised a raid on the adjoining Spanish colony (now the Dominican Republic), which ended in the surrender of the capital. The governor presented him with the keys on a cushion. All the slaves of the island were now free.

Then followed a period of organisation, in the course of which Toussaint Louverture revealed himself as an exceptionally able and strong administrator. He issued edicts, organised plantations, and levied taxes; idleness was punished by flogging and disobedience by death.

In principle at least, however, the colony was still a dependency of the French Republic. Napoleon sent 25,000 men there, aboard seventy warships. The expedition was placed under the command of his brother-in-law Leclerc, the husband of Pauline Bonaparte. After some fierce battles the negroes were compelled to agree to an armi-

MURDER À LA ROCHAMBEAU

stice. A little later, in obedience to secret orders received at the outset of the expedition, Leclerc invited Toussaint Louverture aboard a vessel of the French fleet. Here he was placed under arrest and taken to France, where he was imprisoned in a fortress in the Jura mountains. In utter dejection, he spent his nights writing pathetic letters to Napoleon, most of them beginning with the words: "From the first of the blacks to the first of the whites. . . ." The Emperor preserved silence, but one day the gaoler was ordered to remove pens, ink, and paper from the prisoner's cell. A year after his arrest, Toussaint Louverture was found dead in his prison, by the fire, his forehead resting against the chimney-piece.

Slavery was re-established in the Antilles, and war broke out again.

This time the French army had more than negroes to fight: yellow fever decimated their forces, and in their desperation the officers instituted a reign of terror. Rochambeau, who soon took command, displayed a sadism far exceeding anything known there before. This very handsome officer, who still wore a powdered wig, although this was no longer in fashion, could not see a black man without feeling an irresistible urge to break his head. Leclerc had shot the negroes and hanged them *en masse*; this man drowned them, hunted them with dogs, and suffocated them with sulphur in the holds of ships.

Yet even Rochambeau was beaten in the end. Haiti's independence was proclaimed in 1804, on 1st January. A constitution was improvised and an ex-slave called Dessalines was proclaimed emperor under the name of Jacques I.

During the next hundred years or so we find a succession of *coups d'état*, rebellions, civil wars, brief reigns, and

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

plots ending in varying degrees of violence and bloodshed. In 1915 Guillaume Sam led a revolution, seized the presidency, and was murdered by the mob, after which Haiti was occupied by American marines.

The plane that took me from Havana to Haiti, a week after leaving Hornez' fishery, touched down at Port au Prince airfield some hours after nightfall. An hour later I reached the centre of the town by a long, straight road lined with thatched cabins. It had been a scorching day. Negroes, half-naked or in coloured shirts and wearing wide straw hats, lay in clusters round these shacks, like abandoned marionettes. I passed old negresses in brightly coloured turbans riding mules and pulling at short pipes; parties played cards or dice under the trees and drank rum, indifferent to the clouds of dust raised by taxis and horse-drawn cabs. Peasants trailed in procession along the roadside on their way back to their villages after the day's marketing.

Amid all this, and encroaching sometimes right into the middle of the road, were stacks of new saddles—hundreds of them—with bridles, harness, and harness-bells, in such quantities that it seemed as if the whole island must be one huge merry-go-round of mules, donkeys, and horses.

The taxi-driver who steered me through the throng had stuck a piece of paper on his windscreen, bearing the address of the only person I knew in Haiti: Philip Johnsfair, an American who had been living in Port au Prince for some months.

Once a year Johnsfair left New York to stay in some other part of the world, where he would rent a house for some months, hire a car and a servant, and live—lavishly—by contributing regular articles to New York weeklies.

THE STAPLE TRADES OF TANGIER

I had met him eight years before in Tangier, when we were both living in boats in the harbour, within a few yards of each other. For two months Johnsfair studied the chief business of the port: the traffic in American cigarettes, destined for the coasts of France and Italy; the traffic in gold between the Congo and Tangier, and in men between Tangier and South America. (These were ex-members of the Vichy *milice* or former members of the Wehrmacht, who had taken refuge in Tangier at the end of the war and were being shipped to South America or the Caribbean.) After one lively evening Johnsfair had fallen head first down the long flight of steps leading from the port to the *petit Socco*, had broken a leg and then sailed for the United States, and I had lost sight of him.

When the taxi drew up in front of the house that the American had rented, a flock of ten or a dozen people instantly gathered round. An old negro stepped forward, still holding the shoe he had been mending when we arrived—he was the shoemaker from the shop on the opposite side of the street—and made it his business to explain to me that Johnsfair had gone to watch the cock-fighting. Then he held out his hand in expectation of a coin. It was like a signal: half a dozen urchins dashed at me, hands outstretched and eyes alight.

“White man, white man, gimme *gourde*! Gimme five cents, boss!”

Among them were two plump, well-dressed brats, yelling as loudly as the rest. This surprised me, but after a day or two I was surprised no longer. The tendency to beg is, along with good nature, the most universal characteristic of the Haitians. Almost everyone does it. Even small shopkeepers won't hesitate to leave their shops and ask you for a *gourde* (a coin worth twenty American cents).

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

Surrounded by a little pack of suppliants, I arrived at the Champ-de-Mars, where the cock-fighting was said to be taking place.

This great square, adorned with flowers, statues, trees, and bandstands, forms the centre of Haitian life. Strollers talk politics there, speeches are made, and there during the Revolution the first guillotine was erected. (It is said that a large crowd came to watch the first execution—that of a Haitian convicted of royalist sentiments—yet no sooner had the blade fallen than the nauseated onlookers hurled themselves at the machine and destroyed it. Since that day no guillotine has ever been used in the country.) But for the big straw hats and black faces of the strollers, one might have fancied oneself in provincial France; the groups halted every fifteen paces, like small *rentiers* taking a turn at dusk, and then started off again, emphasising their arguments with wide gestures.

Cock-fighting is the favourite amusement of the negroes of Port au Prince. The birds' heads are shaved, to offer less hold to the adversary, and they slay each other in a ring of beaten earth, watched as a rule by a crowd of from a hundred and fifty to two hundred blacks, who seem possessed by a sort of St Vitus' Dance, similar to that induced by voodoo. Incredible sums are staked. Ragged negroes bring out bundles of *gourdes* and dollars, and before being set upon each other the cocks are passed from hand to hand, their feathers slicked down with spit and their spurs sharpened with a penknife.

There was nothing strange in finding Johnsfair at a cock-fight; he would have matched two rabbits together for the pleasure of betting on them. At Tangier he would bet on the number of vessels anchored in the harbour, on the total (odd or even) of the figures in a serial-number of

JOHNSFAIR'S PASSION

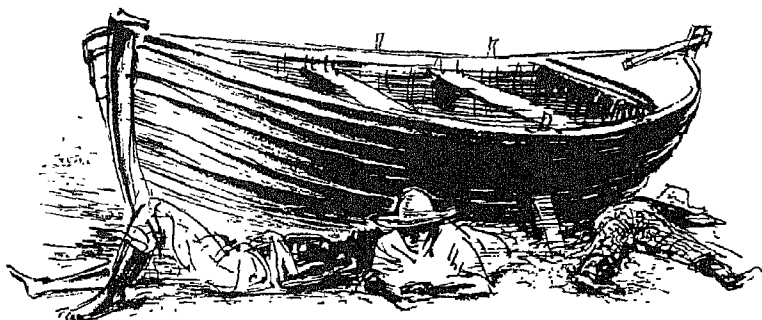
a bank-note pulled from his pocket and pushed under your nose, and so on. He always carried a pair of dice in his waistcoat pocket and a pack of cards in the pocket of his jacket.

He was only three yards away when I spotted him, but he never noticed me until there were no more cocks to watch.

An hour later, as we walked about the Champ-de-Mars, I mentioned sharks. He made a gesture of helplessness. He had no idea where there was any fishing, but he knew a missionary, Father Lartigue, who would be bound to know. Father Lartigue knew everything.

The missionary was a dry little man of about sixty. His face was framed in a thin collar of grey beard. I was just finishing lunch with Johnsfair next day when he arrived.

Hearing that I was interested in shark-fishing, he suggested that we should go and stay for a week or two in a fishing-village about sixty miles from the capital. Johnsfair had never done any shark-fishing and said he would like to try. We decided to leave two days later, and as the missionary had to go in the same direction we promised to drop him off on the way.



CHAPTER TEN

ACCORDING to an old Haitian belief, the dead leave their graves at night and walk about the countryside: and here and there in the island one can still find old negroes willing to swear by their heads, by the heads of their grandchildren, and by one's own that they have seen these zombies walking through the bush.

"They're not dangerous," they tell you. "They look at you without seeing you, and pass by; all they want to do is stretch their legs a bit."

When we had left Port au Prince and were driving through picture-postcard scenery of rounded green hills, copses, and ponds, with clematis and blue columbine flowering between, I talked to Father Lartigue about this legend.

He was sitting in the back of the car, busy carving his walking-stick with a penknife. He had been doing this for years; he was like those Chinese who polish balls of ivory for generations by turning and turning them in their hands.

I had hardly finished speaking when he stopped whittling the wood and looked at me.

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE ZOMBIES

"Let me tell you a strange story," he said.

"Many years ago—back in the dim, distant past—there were sorcerers in this island who discovered a way of paralysing a man's nerve-centres by making him drink an infusion of certain herbs. This turned him into a sort of robot, capable of obeying any order that required no intellectual effort—he could cut wood and use a pick and so on, but was deprived of all initiative. The advantage of the discovery was that it provided unpaid labourers who were given the minimum amount of food and were unable to protest. The damage done by this poison is permanent, and twenty years ago an English scientist published a paper on the subject. At about the same time it was discovered that a young Port au Prince girl of good family, who had disappeared in suspicious circumstances, had been kidnapped, taken into the mountains, and treated with this poison. She was found some years afterwards, and every method known at the time was tried to bring her back to full consciousness, but without success."

Father Lartigue opened his penknife again and added: "That may be the origin of the old belief. And if I hadn't known what I've just told you, and had bumped into one of these robots one night at a bend in the road, I wonder what *I* should have made of it. . . ."

We dropped Father Lartigue and, about an hour later as we were coming to the top of a hill, we saw the sea. A zig-zag road led to a score of thatched cabins lining a track of beaten earth at right-angles to the shore.

At this point on the coast there was a tiny natural harbour, its mole being formed by a rocky barrier jutting into the water in a semi-circle. A hundred yards further on, the sea penetrated the land by a channel barely a yard

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

wide, and then opened into a shallow lagoon, on the shore of which stood about ten other shacks.

Six boats were anchored in the harbour, and three others were drawn up on the beach. We saw two children running along the shore, wearing nothing but big straw hats; they were the only living creatures to be seen in this three-colour landscape—ochre, green, and blue—which was as motionless as a painting.

Having parked the car at the end of the village, we walked along between the double row of shacks as far as the harbour. Three negroes were lying full-length in the shade of a boat; Johnsfair went up to them and tried to make them understand what we wanted; a cabin to rent for a few days and enough food to live on.

There was no cabin to let, but as we insisted, they promised that a small family should be turned out to make room for us by the harbour, in a "house" built of wood and cement and roofed with an old piece of linoleum thatched with straw. There were two bedsteads on the earth floor and an oil-cooker in one corner. Pinned to the walls were photographs cut from the *Schweizer Illustrierte*, a Swiss weekly, which in some mysterious way had turned up here.

Johnsfair carried in our luggage, which we had reduced to the minimum: a rod suitable for big-game fishing, procured the day before, and two carbines which he always carried with him in the boot of his car.

After that we strolled about the harbour. Night had fallen, and one after another the negroes emerged from their cabins like bats; they came up to us in casual groups and shook hands.

They all knew by now that we meant to stay in their village and fish for shark, and they stared in astonishment.

The sea was full of sharks, certainly, but they were seldom fished for; only one man, a mulatto of sixty named Felicien Obin, went out after them every day. He regularly brought back two or three, which he butchered himself. Twice a month he took the skins and oil to sell in Port au Prince. The others lived by ordinary fishing, and sold their catch in the mountain villages.

In one corner of the harbour was a shed furnished with benches and a wooden counter; this was the village café where food and drink were served. An old negress brought us two bottles of rum, and about ten negroes sat down with us to drink and chat.

Then Felicien Obin arrived.

He lived in one of the ten cabins bordering the lagoon. His boat was one of the biggest in the village, he told us, yet it was still not large enough for shark-fishing, and he carried a ballast of pig-iron to prevent the sharks from towing him along too easily. He fished only at night, three or four times a week, and was willing to hire his boat to us, starting next day, on condition he might come too.

Unlike the other fishermen, who spoke a fairly comprehensible French, Obin used a sort of *lingua franca* of French, English, and Spanish mixed with native patois. He spoke in long, musical phrases which he had to repeat several times before we could make any sense of them.

We had just left harbour next day and I was trailing the lure about twenty yards from the boat—more with the idea of showing Johnsfair how to handle his new rod than in any hope of a catch—when the first and only bite we were to get that day came with staggering violence. The rod was nearly snatched overboard. I only just managed to keep hold of it, while the line ran out like an express train. I waited a few moments, and at the first slackening I

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

struck. Three seconds later the line ran out again, more slowly this time, but just as irresistibly. Johnsfair was in luck. He dropped the carbine he had brought with him in the hope of shooting some big fish, and gazed open-mouthed at the sight. The coloured man at the helm wagged his head.

"I know," he said. "Great, great *tiburón*. Line going to break. . . ."

I tried to recover the line while he manœuvred the boat in such a way as to offer the greatest resistance to the struggling monster. But what monster? I had never known any to attack so fiercely.

An hour later the fish was still fighting several hundred yards away, and with aching arms I passed the rod to Obin, wondering if we could have hooked a whale.

At eleven o'clock, three and a half hours after the tussle had begun, the situation was unchanged; we handed the rod back and forth to each other, recovering a few yards of line and then watching it run out again. Other craft were now cruising round us; some of them went back to pick up cargoes of women, children, old men, and two dogs. All were yelling, shouting encouragement, and clapping. We might have been at the races.

At noon we managed to bring the exhausted creature alongside, and the boats drew near, their occupants suddenly silent. Then there was a great shout of laughter.

We had caught a tuna. A tuna barely three feet long. The hook, instead of being in its mouth, had pierced the skin of its round, black body and stuck there—hence its combativeness—while the trace and a good three yards of line were wound round its tail.

For a week afterwards the villagers talked of nothing but this tuna (an exceptional catch at that season and at

“ALL GOOD EXCEPT HIS BITE”

that distance from shore) and of “the whites who catch fish by the tail.” Through this ludicrous incident we won a certain renown, which was spread by the fish-sellers right up into the mountains.

For the next few days I went out fishing alone with old Felicien Obin, as Johnsfair wanted to visit other villages along the coast.

In front of his shack Obin had built a long plank platform which jutted a yard over the water; on this he laid all the sharks he brought in, skinned them, washed the skins in sea-water, and dried them. Lastly, he performed the delicate operation of extracting oil from the livers. This he did by cutting the livers up into large pieces and putting them into a copper; he then poured water over them and lit the fire underneath, and stirred the mixture with a stick for hours on end.

The solids fell to the bottom of the vessel while the oil floated to the top. He filtered it and poured it into kegs. A medium-sized shark produces about four gallons. (Shark-liver oil is used in pharmacy, tanning, in tempering steel, and, more generally, in the manufacture of any products requiring a thin type of oil.)

The fins were carefully cut up before being sent to Port au Prince, where he sold them to a small Chinese colony.

Any meat which he did not keep for his own consumption—he ate platefuls of it every day—was pickled in brine like cod, and sent to the mountain villages. The remains he pounded up to make fertiliser and poultry-food.

“Shark all good,” said Obin, “except his bite.”

One day he brought back an extraordinary catch: a tiger-shark about ten feet long with a fresh scar a few inches from the tail. While cutting it up a few minutes

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

later he exclaimed in surprise. The wound had been caused by a swordfish, and the sword had snapped off, leaving a piece about eight inches long in the shark's body. (The fish cannot long have survived the battle, for swordfish use their weapon to kill their prey, and without it they cannot feed.)

Obin gazed at the fragment of sword for some time, deep in thought; then he uttered a series of long, melodious phrases, from which I gathered that the shark's chief enemy so far as he knew was not the swordfish, but a creature he called the balloon-fish (*Diodon antennatus*): although little bigger than a man's fist, it kills the shark in a really fiendish manner.

When angry, the diodon has the faculty of blowing itself up to quite a large size by swallowing water and air, meanwhile emitting through the mouth a liquid which has some of the properties of vitriol. If a shark accidentally swallows one of these balloon-fish, the latter swells up and spits out its caustic liquid, inflicting terrible internal burns on the shark. Then it erects the sharp spines on its body and nibbles its way out through the stomach-wall and flank of the shark, which plunges to the bottom like a torpedoed ship.

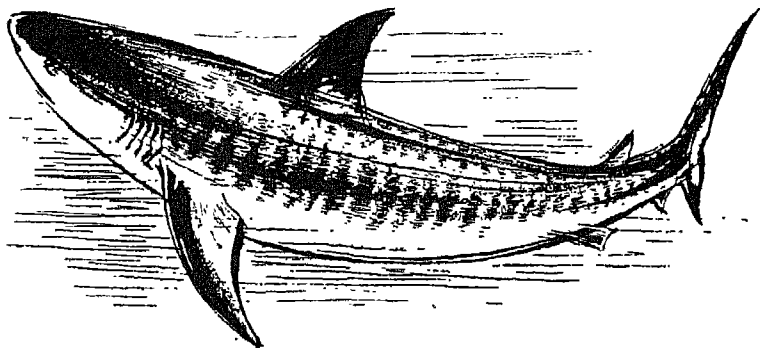
When he had done his fishing and cut up his catch, old Felicien Obin would settle down in front of his shack by the lagoon and stay there for hours, pulling at long, thin cigars which he made himself from tobacco he grew behind his cabin.

Sometimes at nightfall Johnsfair and I would join him; then the old man would offer us rum and coffee, and constrain us to smoke some of his murderous cigars. One evening I taught him how to catch flying-fish, according to the method employed by Señor Hornez, and on our re-

SHARK-SHOOTING

turn from this trip we realised that his friendly feelings towards us had greatly increased. But alas, the honeymoon period lasted only three days—that is, until he caught us shooting at sharks from the top of the rocks.

The idea was Johnsfair's. While walking on the jetty the day before, we had seen two sharks gliding along only a yard or two out. This was natural enough, as it was



here that the village refuse was thrown. Next day we managed to procure a large piece of meat and put it into an open-slatted packing-case, which we cast into the water attached to the shore by a rope. Then we each took a carbine.

"Now, then," said Johnsfair, who, of course, had but one idea in organising this, "ten dollars to the one who kills the first of these muck-eaters!"

We waited all day without seeing a single shark. Yet the bait was tempting enough, and a thin thread of blood trickled from the crate and mingled with the blue water.

At dusk, four sharks appeared at once. We hit one of them, and it began turning round and round, lashing its tail. As we had both fired simultaneously, no money

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

passed. What followed was so fascinating that even Johnsfair forgot to shoot.

The sharks abandoned the bait, surrounded their mortally wounded companion and remained absolutely motionless. For some seconds we had the extraordinary feeling of being able to read their thoughts, as clearly as if they had been written on a blackboard. The wounded shark was twice as big as the biggest of them, and they were waiting until they could safely attack it. It stopped turning and began to rock, dribbling out a thin grey cloud. (Blood mingling with water beneath the surface looks grey.) This was the last stage of its agony; the rest of the scene was played out in the depths, and all we saw was a great flurry of foam and big red bubbles rising to burst on the surface.

Obin heard the report of our guns and came up just as we were reloading. He saw the packing-case and understood. Raising his arms to heaven, he began muttering imprecations in Spanish; then he fell silent, and his face took on an expression of profound grief. We could not fail to understand: we had been taking the bread from his mouth.

Some mornings after that, I came upon Felicien Obin by the lagoon, in the middle of a group of fishermen. Everybody was talking hard. Among them was a tall negro whom I hadn't seen in the village before. He was naked to the waist and wore blue jeans, and he seemed to be the central figure in the conversation. He left the group from time to time, went down to the edge of the water as if to gauge its depth, then pointed to a particular part of the lagoon and returned to the rest, as if to convince them of something.

THIRTY-SHARK SAMBO

I went up to them. The black athlete was speaking Spanish. Obin, who was interpreting, fell silent at my approach, and everyone looked at me as if expecting me to solve a delicate problem.

The unknown negro took two steps towards me and shook hands; I thought my bones would crack. I must have winced, for he laughed loudly and clapped me on the shoulder with a blow powerful enough to fell an ox.

These preliminaries over, Obin explained in his own jargon what it was all about.

The negro in the jeans, with his half-baked look and loud laugh, had suggested a startling plan, which was to drive a big shark into the lagoon through the narrow channel that separated it from the sea, and leave it there "on ice" for a time, until it was hungry. Then he would tackle it with a knife in front of the assembled village and, having killed it, receive a small reward. His name was Sambo and he came from the Dominican Republic, where he had killed some thirty sharks with his own hands. For the moment he was living in one of the mountain villages, where he was to marry a girl he had known in Port au Prince.

Naturally he had heard of the arrival of two white foreigners, and this had encouraged him to come down from the hills. The whites were to contribute fifty dollars each as the price of admission to the show.

The other men were hesitating because they suspected some trick. Attack a shark with a knife? Such a thing had never been seen, declared Obin sententiously. Sambo would merely waste their time and wring a few *gourdes* out of them on some pretext or other. I was asked for my opinion.

In fact, the idea excited them all very much, and as soon

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

as it was agreed that Sambo should receive no money until after the fight, Obin himself gave in. There were few amusements in the village, apart from cock-fighting every other Sunday, which enthralled the men but aroused only moderate enthusiasm in the women. The latter preferred the travelling film-show which came once a month from Port au Prince, in a van driven by two mulattos. The films were shown in the harbour, the screen being a sheet stretched between two poles, and these performances were made the occasion of a tremendous spree which soaked up all the week's profits; for the movie-men brought not only prehistoric films with them, but a whole cargo of cakes, coloured frocks, combs, and other knick-knacks.

Once the plan had been agreed upon, Sambo explained how he would set about it, though without giving too many details. He would stand in the lagoon at a point where the water was no more than five feet deep, and wait, knife in hand, until the shark attacked him.

He showed us his weapon: a broad, two-edged blade about ten inches long set in a curved haft. He told us that he had already been wounded three times, and showed us a deep semi-circular scar on his left thigh. He added that no shark attacked by him had ever survived the battle. On this occasion, too, he expected to earn his money.

Preparations for the show were put in hand.

To drive a shark through a channel seventeen feet long by three wide into a pool which is nowhere deeper than a couple of fathoms is in itself a feat. Sambo began by throwing in chunks of rotten meat at each end of the channel, and in the channel itself. The first sharks appeared at the end of the afternoon. They dashed at the bait floating in the sea at the mouth of the narrows, and

A SUCCESSFUL SHARK-HERD

then—either because they were no longer hungry or because instinct warned them of a trap—they turned about and disappeared.

The procedure was repeated next day. Sambo stood beside the inlet, ready to block it with boards as soon as a shark passed along it; but none seemed inclined to try.

By the evening of the third day the villagers were getting restless. They didn't want to wait six months. After work the fishermen came to sit in little groups beside the channel, chatted for a bit, and then moved off with wagging heads and suppressed laughter. Then a shark did come in—a blue shark measuring twelve or thirteen feet—which could not have eaten for a week, judging from the ravenous way it devoured the meat at the entrance to the lagoon. The channel had been swept clean of bait, as if with a broom.

Once in the lagoon, its hunger appeased, the monster seemed surprised at the shallowness of the water, and cruised about disconcertedly; then it dropped slowly to the bottom and lay there motionless.

Having blocked the outlet, Sambo rose and squatted by the edge of the lagoon, just above the apparently lifeless shark. There, with a tense look on his face, he gazed at the great fish for a long time, as if trying to guess at the quickness of its reactions and the thickness of its armour.

Relaxed and smiling, he then rose and uttered a series of howls, to announce to the village that the first stage of the operation was completed, and that in three or four days the show could begin.

This delay was necessary, Sambo explained to me, both to give the shark time to become familiar with the shape

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

of the pool and to get hungry. It would then attack as soon as he entered the water.*

"He must attack first," said Sambo. "I can't kill him otherwise."

This time he explained to me in detail how he would set about it. It was a neat and simple method.

"The shark dashes at me, and see-saws a little just before snapping at my thigh. I step back quickly, bring the knife forward and plunge it into his throat. As he moves very quickly then, he rips himself up on it, like a zip-fastener!"

It was best, of course, to kill at the first blow.

"For afterwards, with all the blood, the water gets cloudy and Sambo can't see. *Comprende, señor?*"

Naturally there were risks, but they were not so great as one might think. The whole art lay in knowing when to step back, and to be quick about it. (The terrible crescent-shaped scar was a souvenir of one of these underwater *corridas* when Sambo had retreated a split second too late.)

He added that in the Dominican Republic, where he meant to return as soon as he was married, he and one other man practised this sport at festival-time, when many people came down into the coastal villages. The idea had come to them after they heard of an American mulatto who regularly earned small fortunes in the Florida swamps by tackling alligators with his bare hands, for the entertainment of tourists.

The mulatto (of whom a short film had been made) was able to do this by taking advantage of a peculiarity in the

* I mentioned in Chapter 5 that sharks seldom attack negroes. It should be remembered that in this case the shark had been starved during its imprisonment in the lagoon.

CORRIDA DE TIBURÓN

jaw mechanism of the alligator. The animal has muscles enabling it to seize its prey with tremendous force, but the muscles for opening the jaws are practically nonexistent. Once he could grasp the jaws and hold them shut, he deprived his adversary of its most formidable weapon. A fascinating wrestling-match ensued in a few feet of water and mud at the edge of the swamp, ending as often as not in the beast being dragged ashore, where it was roped by the man's assistants.

"He called himself 'the first man to kill an alligator with his bare hands,' " said Sambo. "So we decided to be 'the first men to kill sharks with their bare hands.' "

What Sambo didn't know—nor I either at the time—was that this hand-to-hand struggle between man and shark was the revival of an old Polynesian custom.

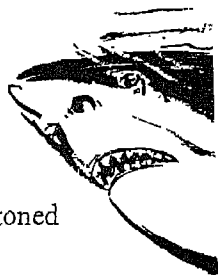
In the Hawaiian islands, some centuries ago, on occasions of popular rejoicing, the native kings organised duels in which men, armed only with a long shark's tooth fixed to a horn handle, challenged sharks to single combat. Tradition says that the Hawaiians attacked the shark from the rear; they seized it by the tail and hung on, and from this comparatively safe position plunged their weapon into the creature's belly.

On Sunday, four days after the shark's entry, at three o'clock in the afternoon, Sambo walked into the lagoon.

The crowd massed on the bank presented a really astonishing sight. In this barren setting, this end-of-the-world landscape, the locals had dressed up as if for a party at the *Cabane Choucounne* (a night-dive in Port au Prince). They wore ties, stiff collars, and white jackets, or else dark suits, or ancient dinner-jackets which looked as if they had attended every gathering in the Haitian capital



for a generation, and which the fishermen had bought either from a second-hand-clothes dealer in Port au Prince or from the movie-men. All these garments were shabby and dirty, but meticulously buttoned up.



The women wore frocks with starched trimmings, and carried parasols or fanned themselves with fans made from cardboard boxes.

During the foregoing week the whole village had passed along the shores of the lagoon gazing at the shark, which paraded slowly in wide, concentric circles, evidently searching for something to eat; they had watched it for hours, thrown stones at it, and generally amused themselves. And now, massed side by side, they waited.

At the other end of the lagoon a fisherman threw stones to attract the shark's attention, so that Sambo might reach the spot he had chosen for the fight. He waded out a few yards from the edge until the water reached his chest.

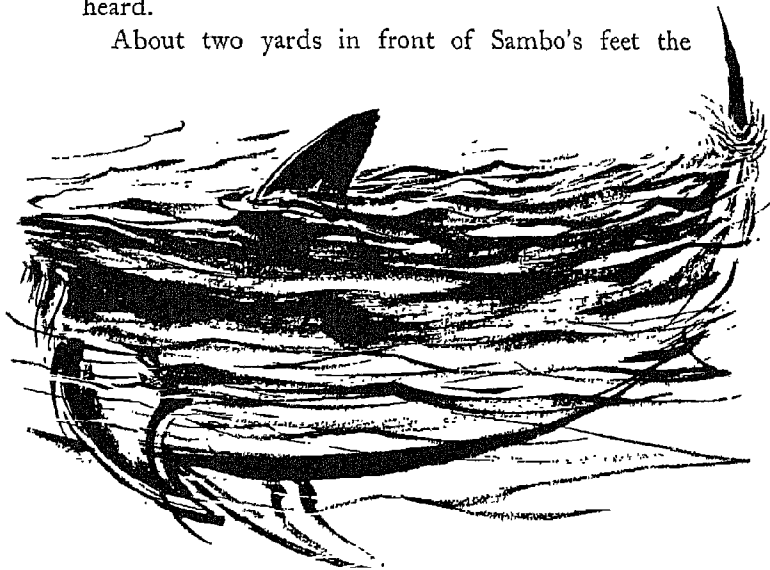
The shark was nowhere to be seen; then suddenly, in a corner of the lagoon that sparkled like a mirror in the sun, a fin appeared at the surface, moved slowly along in the

TWO YARDS AWAY

direction of the negro and then sank, leaving behind it a faint trail of foam.

Sambo bent over the water in a waiting position, his knife between his knees. From the crowd not a sound was heard.

About two yards in front of Sambo's feet the



sandy floor of the lagoon shelved abruptly to a depth of a fathom or two; here the shark paused, its nose towards him. A tremor that ran through its body made it look as if it were on the point of attacking; but many long minutes were still to pass before that happened. The great fish turned about, went away, came back. . . . At each turn a murmur went up from the crowd.

Then for the last time the shark hung motionless some yards from the negro. Just when it looked like turning yet again, we saw Sambo testing the sand behind him with

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

his foot; then he moved slowly backwards to provoke the attack.

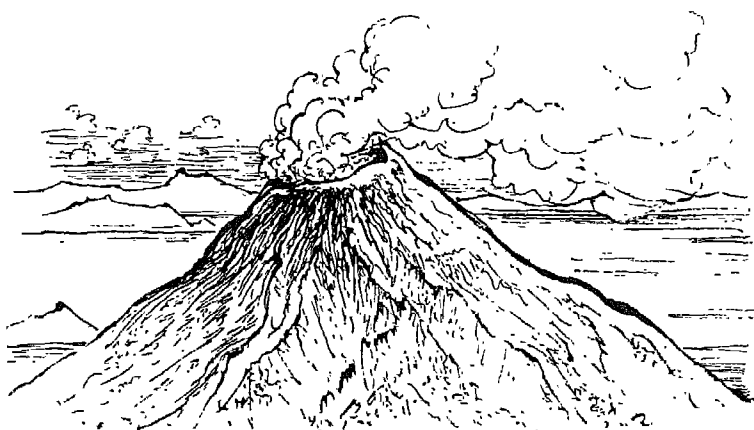
The rest was lost in a maelstrom of foam.

A few seconds later Sambo straightened himself and almost immediately dived, his eyes apparently fixed on the shark, which we could not see for the flurry of the water. He stayed below for what seemed a long time, then stood up, raised the hand that held the knife and showed it to the crowd. With the other he pointed to the place in the lagoon where the unseen shark had gone to the bottom.

Then, as in the circus when the acrobat catches the trapeze after the perilous double somersault, one could hear a long sigh moving like a wave through the double row of onlookers. No exclamations, however. The general feeling was that the whole thing had happened too quickly and that they hadn't had their money's worth.

Then the shark was dragged up on to the sand, where, with its belly ripped open along its whole length, it appeared nearly twice as big as we had thought it. From the incision, which was as neat as a surgeon's, issued blood and entrails, and this did prompt some nods of satisfaction. It was a nice bit of work.

The rest of the day was spent in dancing and drinking. The people danced not to tom-toms but quite prosaically to the music of an ancient gramophone (another "present" from the movie-men). By midnight the whole village was asleep. Some of the men had collapsed on the sand, knocked out by alcohol, and were sleeping it off in their double-breasted suits and old dinner-jackets. It was an extraordinary sight. One might have thought that some vessel had gone down off the coast and that the passengers, in their evening clothes, had been washed up here.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHEN voyaging among the Caribbean islands one may hear of those who are sometimes known as "ex-boarders of the Maroni." * On the way from the Antilles to Mexico, via Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, San Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala one might count them by scores, and I myself have reason to be grateful to the gaol-bird to whom Johnsfair introduced me one evening in Port au Prince, two days after our return to the capital.

We had just entered the Cabane Choucouné, a night-club that looks like an African kraal, with a conical roof set on a huge cylinder of bamboo. Johnsfair glanced all round the room, and his eyes rested on one particular table to which he quietly drew my attention. A man of about fifty in a white dinner-jacket, bald and somewhat pot-bellied, with a bland and rather foolish face, was sitting there with a splendid negress dressed in a gown of white taffeta in the latest Paris fashion. They stood up to

* River Maroni in French Guiana. The reference is to the old convict settlement there.

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

dance and we watched them. The woman was covered with jewellery, and on the ex-convict's right hand sparkled a big diamond.

"An exporter," Johnsfair told me in a low voice. "He exports everything that can be exported: coffee, rum, sugar, bananas. Married to that negress. Goes to New York once a month—without her. That's his Mercedes in front of the door. Armed assault followed by murder, in 1927 at Marseille. Twenty years hard labour, escaped twice."

At the sight of Johnsfair a broad smile overspread the ex-convict's face. He murmured something to his wife and left her in the middle of a rumba to come and speak to us. They were drinking champagne, so we drank champagne with them, and talked.

When Johnsfair got up to dance, the other man moved nearer to me, rested his shantung-clad elbows on the table and looked at me with little grey eyes alight with goodwill. He knew that I was interested in sharks, and began by telling me that he had done both shark- and tarpon-fishing in Nicaragua—in Lake Nicaragua, he added, which was a huge lake: a real inland sea. Millions of years ago it formed part of an ocean gulf like that of California; then a series of volcanic eruptions threw up a chain of mountains and blocked its mouth. In the course of years the salt water became fresh, and the sharks in it adapted themselves accordingly.

"So now this lake is the only place in the world where one can fish for shark in fresh water. They're a little lighter in colour than sea-shark, but in all essentials they're the same. I've caught some over twenty feet long—real prehistoric monsters. That was after my second gaol-break—the real one. . . ." (Here he broke off. It was the

THE PRESIDENT'S KITTY

first time he had mentioned his convict past and he looked at me inquiringly, as if to discover whether I knew about it. Then he went on.)

"I've still got a friend there, a Marseillais like myself. I haven't seen him for years. We did five years of prison together, and escaped together—and I haven't seen him for years. We write to each other sometimes; I've told him to come here. I've got a job for him here—a good job. But he won't. He wants to stay by his lake, with mosquitoes and fever. Why?"

The fat hand with its big diamond picked up the bottle of champagne delicately and filled the glasses as Johnsfair and his partner came back and sat down.

"Why does he? He lives in San Carlos, at the mouth of the San Juan river, near the frontier of Costa Rica. San Carlos is hell. And the fool's gone and taken root there." There was a short silence, and then:

"You may go to Nicaragua. Go to San Carlos if you want shark-fishing; you'll meet my friend there. His name is . . ." (a slight hesitation) "let's say Maréchal. His real name doesn't matter; they call him Alvarez over there."

Two days later an aircraft was carrying me towards Nicaragua.

In Managua the capital you start by paying an entry-tax. These few dollars constitute your personal contribution to the fortune of President Somoza (the third largest fortune in all America, according to some statistics). For this is the characteristic feature of Nicaragua: it is in the hands of a man who administers it as if it were his private estate, developing it slightly and enriching himself greatly. When I landed at Managua the President was

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

Anastasio Somoza. He was assassinated at the end of 1956, but was succeeded by his eldest son, so the property of 57,144 square miles remains in the family.

My first concern on arriving in Managua was to find a way of getting to the lake and its fresh-water sharks. I didn't go so far as to expect a train to take me there (I had been told too much about the country to indulge in such a flight of fancy), but I imagined there might be a few ante-diluvian buses or at the very worst a convoy of bullock carts; but I was still in the realms of illusion. Such things presupposed the existence of roads. And there were no roads. The only trail that could claim the name of road led to Granada, north of the lake, and I was going south.

Nor was there any hope of hiring a boat: that would have cost a fortune. And besides, there were no boats. President Somoza owned some aeroplanes, and even a small helicopter: would he, perhaps, be willing to put one at my disposal? The President was a most agreeable man, I was told; he would certainly see me and would cut himself in two to enable me to go shark-fishing. He fished himself every Sunday (but not for shark, and not so far away). But there was no airfield at the southern end of the lake;* and as for the helicopter, it was being repaired.

"You'll have to wait for the right moment," said Pierre Dreyfus. (Dreyfus is an agreeable Frenchman who has made a fortune in Managua by founding a sort of super one-price store where everything is sold that can be sold in these latitudes, from bicycle-wheel spokes to model gowns.) "And the right moments to leave for San Carlos are like the eruptions of Momotombo: they occur when least expected."

* There is now an airfield at San Carlos.

NICARAGUA'S GREATEST ATTRACTION

Momotombo, whose greatest claim to fame is that it was used as a -bo rhyme by Victor Hugo in the *Légende des Siècles*, is a constant threat to Managua—a threat whose visible sign is a thick plume of white smoke. Somewhere about 1930 an eruption destroyed the whole town, and Momotombo became the greatest attraction in the country. I went to see the crater, and a week afterwards I requested an audience of President Somoza.

That evening I plunged into the President's life-story and was greatly reassured: a man with such a career behind him must be very resourceful. My application reached him at a moment when he possessed a third of all cultivated land in Nicaragua, a fifth of the gold it produced, the monopoly of the cattle-export, the quinine monopoly, the spinning-mills, and the newspaper with the largest circulation in the country. All this he had acquired in the space of eighteen years, having begun by manufacturing false gold coin.

The reply to my request arrived next day, in the shape of a telegram in Spanish: the President would receive me at three o'clock sharp that afternoon. Carrying the telegram in my hand as a safe-conduct, I passed a triple line of guards and entered the stronghold.

There I found a grand parade of National Guards. They were all over the place, dressed in khaki shirts and trousers, with revolvers at their waists or sub-machine-guns under their arms. I was shown into an anteroom where a dozen typical Nicaraguans were waiting. They were petitioners: some of them had been waiting for a week. They left the palace to eat and sleep, and then returned to take their places on the leather benches until the President would see them.

Somoza received everybody, so it was only a question

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

of time. I had heard that he enjoyed tackling the minor problems of his people and chatting in a playful, fatherly way with the most hopeless lay-abouts of Managua. So these people were not at all impatient; they laughed and told stories, and showed that the average Nicaraguan has a great and unexpected store of patience and good humour. After about an hour the door of the anteroom opened and I entered the presidential office, passing ahead of the double row of those who had been waiting for a week. No thought of protest seemed to cross their minds.

The huge room was like a bazaar. The vast table behind which Somoza was sitting was covered with about a hundred miscellaneous objects: presents left there by visitors who had been granted a private audience. Most of them were statuettes, and from where I stood the President was framed between an imposing stucco Virgin of the Seven Sorrows and a baseball bat in gilt metal. He rose with a rather tired smile and shook hands with an air of frankness and cordiality. Then we began chatting across the top of the statuettes.

The President was dressed in the same uniform as his National Guards, and was exactly as he had been described to me and as he was portrayed all over Nicaragua: a simple, cheerful man, a kindly man, whose most sophisticated amusements were walks in the country, picnics, and telling rude stories. I felt he would have been happier playing bowls than sitting in this pompous room, where the presence of half a dozen National watch-dogs somewhat over-emphasised the fact that the dictator's profession is not a restful one. I couldn't put a hand in my pocket without the sensation of being X-rayed; might I not be carrying a gun?

PRESIDENTIAL EXCURSION

Anastasio Somoza uttered a long sentence stressing the affection he had for Europe and for France in particular (which he so much regretted never having seen); and all at once he looked terribly bored.

His blue eyes lit up when I mentioned sharks. There he was on familiar ground. He rose and led me on to the terrace overlooking the town: why go so far for sharks when I could idle in this pleasant part of the country and avoid the risk of malaria? Anastasio Somoza did not say this in so many words, but that was clearly the gist of what he was trying to express as he waved his hand at the landscape. And that was as far as we got.

As for fishing, the President was going to fish in the Pacific next Sunday, and I was given a cordial invitation to come too.

It was a delightful day, with a great deal of sunshine, a great deal of water, and a great many National Guards.

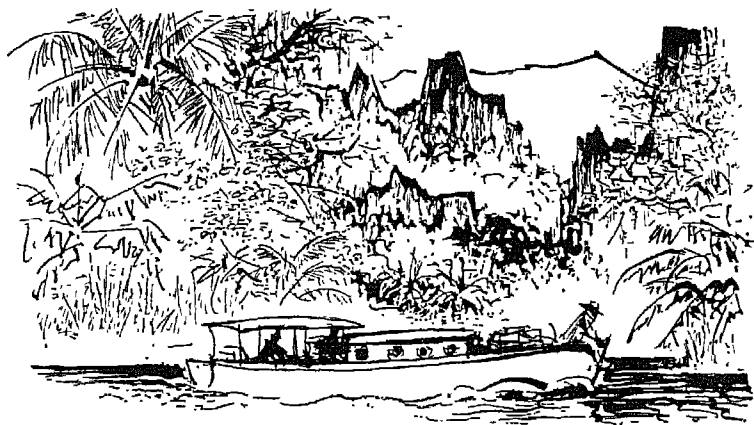
The place was called Puerto Somoza. So far it was only a port in embryo, with embryo docks, but that was because it had only just been opened. One could be sure that under President Somoza's administration it would develop very quickly. About ten people had been invited, and we stepped aboard a small motor-boat and began cruising about the harbour. We were even bold enough to emerge for half an hour into the open waters of the Pacific. The President sat in the stern, his eyes protected from the glare by a cap with a peak on which was written Vote for Somoza. The third richest man in the world fished like any little urchin of Havana, with a line rolled round a stick.

As no fish showed any inclination to bite at the presidential hook, we returned to shore. A long table had been set up under an open shed, and we lunched there, while

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

silent boys revolved round us with dish-cloths, flapping off the flies that competed with us for the food.

At the end of the afternoon the procession of cars returned to Managua, and evening fell on one more presidential Sunday.



CHAPTER TWELVE

A FEW evenings later I entered the bar of the Lido (one of the two hotels in Managua) to have a drink with someone perfectly in keeping with the collection of odd characters I had met in the course of my travels: an ex-sergeant of the Foreign Legion, ex-mercenary (he had worn the uniforms of half a dozen different armies) and now a small shopkeeper. He was known as *Coronel* Laszlo Pataky, having won this title in the course of his mysterious but quite genuine campaigns.

Once or twice a year Pataky renews his links with the past by putting on boots, slipping the key under the shop-door, and setting off to spend a few weeks as a solitary hunter in the unexplored regions of Nicaragua. I was told that he often toured the shores of Lake Niagaragua and that he would tell me how to get to San Carlos. He was a man of about fifty, who managed to look gentle and kind despite the build of a heavy-weight boxer and the hands of a garotter. He had been born somewhere in Central

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

Europe, but may well have forgotten the exact place, for he never spoke of it.

I had met him after dinner at the Country Club, where Europeans in Managua try to kill their empty evenings by playing poker or bridge. Pataky had won a few dollars off the general agent for a famous brand of whisky, so we had brought the latter to the Lido to restore them to him in another form.

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning. The bar was almost empty; only two tables were taken, near the green, still waters of the hotel pool. At one of them, two quiet men in white suits were talking together in a low voice; and even Pataky, who knew all Managua, did not know who they were. But he was richly endowed with the adventurer's most essential attribute: the gift for making contact with strangers; and we were soon in conversation with them.

They came to Managua only twice or three times a year. They were Germans who had emigrated to Nicaragua about thirty years before and now lived in San Carlos, where they ran a small gold-mine situated between the lake and the Atlantic coast, in that part of Central America which is at once among the least known and the richest, as far as mineral wealth is concerned.

An hour earlier, Laszlo Pataky had mentioned the mode of transport he had used on his last expedition in order to reach the southern end of Lake Nicaragua: it was a mule. This information had caused my fresh-water sharks to recede to the limits of my horizon. I should never get there! But these two prospectors hardly looked as if they had come from San Carlos by mule. And indeed, they had travelled from San Carlos to Granada, at the northern tip of the lake not far from Managua, in a small

A PAG OF GUININE

motor-boat, and from there had come on to the capital in an Oldsmobile belonging to the smaller of the two, who had a long scar on his left cheek and looked like Peter Lorre. They were going back in a week's time and offered to take me with them. They were even kind enough to lengthen their journey by some hours so as to drop me at San Carlos, for they were not returning direct. I asked whether I should need any special equipment for the journey, such as boots or a revolver, etc.

"Nein!" answered Peter Lorre with a great laugh. "Only a pag full of guinine!"

A week later we left Granada behind us. The motor-boat, which was about thirty feet long, was laden with stores for the gold-mine: queerly shaped attachments for the great machine that crushed the gold-bearing rock.

The mine was really a sort of quarry open to the sky, where about twenty men were employed. Sometimes the blocks they loosened with their picks contained big nuggets, but not often. As a rule, the gold did not appear until the rock had been crushed and "filtered."

Brennecker, the technical director of the little concession, sat in the bows of the boat with his feet dangling over the water, and let his eyes wander over the landscape of forests and jagged rocks that glided slowly by. There was no sign of life. An occasional bird sailed over the lake, which, astern of us, stretched as far as we could see; an expanse of greyish blue which I could hardly believe was encircled by more mountains like these, with their summits of ochre and dark green. The heat was intense; there was not a breath of air stirring above the water in which great fish glided unseen, in cool silence. And so it

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

would go on until the end of the day; we should not reach San Carlos before nightfall.

"Do you know what the men here call the sun?" said Brennecker suddenly. "They call it 'the dust of hell-fire.' If it weren't for that—that and the mosquitoes . . ."

He swept the landscape with his hand and added:

"But it's hell . . ."

This was the land of the Sumos and the Mosquitos, of the last descendants of the Rama Indians; and of Zambos (mestizos; half-Indians, half-negroes); the land of the descendants of black slaves shipwrecked on their way to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some, clinging to wreckage, managed to reach the coast, and settled there. In most cases these peoples live today in water-tight compartments, as it were, cultivating rice, black beans, *yuca*, and bananas; fishing, looking for gold on their own account, or working in mines or felling trees. The Sumos, the purest Indian race in Nicaragua, still hunt with bow and arrows; they do not cultivate the soil, and seek nothing from it but gold.

"And if it was only gold," Brennecker added. "But who knows? Emeralds—uranium perhaps . . ."

Brennecker had been living in this region for twenty years, and did not know a twentieth part of it. North of these solitudes, wedged between two rivers of which one—the Rio Coco—flows through Nicaraguan territory and the other through that of Honduras, lies a triangle of country that belongs to no one, and is known as "disputed territory." It is subject to no human law but that of bows and arrows and Colt revolvers, and I never met anyone in Nicaragua who could tell me who lived there, what grew there, or what was the quality of the ore lying perhaps only a few inches below the surface of the soil.

THE MOST INCREDIBLE SNAKES

"I did go there one day," Brennecker told me. "I was driving a jeep along a sort of natural track winding between two lines of trees when I saw, about fifty yards ahead, a huge fallen tree-trunk which barred the way. I told the boy who was with me to go and find some way of shifting it. He came back at a run. It wasn't a tree-trunk at all, but a snake. It stirred and began moving slowly towards us. . . ."

There was a silence, and then he added:

"I've seen the most incredible snakes in this country during the last twenty years—and I can assure you that I know how to handle a gun. But that day I left the revolver where it was; I just stepped on the gas and drove off."

South of Lake Nicaragua, a river carries the fresh water of the great inland sea into the Atlantic: the Rio San Juan. San Carlos is on the estuary. Most of the houses, some of which are built on piles, are of wood. The timber trade is local industry No. 1. Logs glide over the waters of the lake and along the Rio San Juan to San Juan del Norte, the Atlantic port at its mouth, where vessels swing at their moorings along wooden wharves. The heat is like a furnace, and perfectly still. Indians with square heads and slanting eyes, negroes, mulattos, and near-whites, all wearing the uniform of the tropics—shirt over trousers—lounge about with curiously slow movements, as if they were walking not through air but through water. Everybody seems to be waiting—but for what? The place feels like a dead-end, with the people in it moving round and round in circles.

Not for some days does one discover the gambling-dens in the alleys of San Carlos, where fortunes in dollars, *cordobas*, and gold-dust are lost and won; and the fact that

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

there are women. Where do the women come from? No one knows. The Indian women, yes—but the others? The mysterious ways by which they arrived in this outlandish spot may once have led through Buenos Aires, but if so it was so long ago that they lost their mother-tongue on the way; they speak bad Spanish interlarded with Indian words, and are no doubt waiting for the man who will give them enough gold dust all at once to enable them to leave.

Not everyone in San Carlos lives on gold. Far from it; but those who do not have done so in the past or will do so in the future. The rest think about it.

It is perhaps because gold is always so near these people that new faces arouse no curiosity in San Carlos. The proprietress of the hotel I went to, shortly after the Germans had left me at the entrance to the town, looked at me with just a little more surprise than a Trouville innkeeper might show at the sight of an unknown customer. She had only one room vacant; it was on the ground floor, but had a mosquito-net and a view over the lake; and—she added, as a hint that any hesitation on my part would be a discourtesy—the room was occupied as a rule by a captain of the *Guardia Nacional*, at present away (poor man) at the other end of Nicaragua.

The officer had left a rifle, an empty ammunition-pouch, two or three khaki shirts, and a framed photograph of a fetching if rather fat little brunette.

My reluctance arose from the fact that besides these military and sentimental relics, the room was encumbered with huge flower-pots half full of earth, planks, and old packing-cases; all this stuff, stacked up in a corner, formed an ideal lair for one of the smallest hotel-guests in Nicaragua: the *serpent minute*.

DEATH BETWEEN THE TOES

It was in a heap like this one that a European of Managua had found one some weeks before. Then I remembered that the *serpent minute* is not equipped to bite any but the most sensitive parts of the skin: between the toes and fingers, for instance. By sleeping under the mosquito-net with my socks on and my fists clenched I ought to be all right.

I set down my case in the corner and went out to find Alvarez, the escaped convict.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I soon found that it would be no easy matter to make contact with Alvarez. His past record and the fact that the limiting period for his recapture was not yet up meant that my first inquiries had the opposite effect to what I expected: people shut up like clams. They seemed to waver between two beliefs. Either I was a police-officer sent to bring him in or an ex-fellow-prisoner come to settle accounts with him.

A three-day investigation among the San Carlos gambling-houses revealed this much: Alvarez owned a motor-boat in which he sailed twice a month to trade with Indians on the shores of the lake. But I was unlucky: he had just left, and no one knew the date of his return.

I forgot him for the moment and went down to the harbour with the idea of getting to know some of the fishermen. There another disappointment awaited me: shark-fishing seemed to be the last thing the local people did, for

A SUBJECT NOT MENTIONED

there was no sign of any place to cut up the catch. The fishermen, mostly Indians, came into harbour with their craft laden to the gunnels, but no triangular fin was to be seen among their colourful freight.

Some Europeans had told me of a small fishery about twelve miles from San Carlos, which had been run by a Belgian immigrant for the last ten years. His name was Louis Piéchart. But something in the manner of the first Indians I approached made me hesitate: they spoke of shark-fishing matters not only with reserve but with positive embarrassment. The shark, too, it seemed, was taboo.

My first impression was that the fishermen suspected me of some plan that would interfere with their habits or income, and that they were waiting to see what it was before helping me. But I was quite wrong; their reserve was due to other causes. It was Louis Piéchart who first told me about it.

Piéchart lived in a bungalow on the lake shore, quite near San Carlos. When I knocked at his door during siesta-time he was slumped in a rocking-chair but not asleep. He was performing the ritual that occupied him from two o'clock until six every day; which was to pick ice-cubes out of a wine-cooler, suck them, and then rub them over his face and neck, while a servant passed silently to and from between his master and a huge refrigerator.

Despite the heat, which melted the ice as lead melts under a blow-lamp, the Belgian still managed to weigh over 220 lbs. What one could see of his body—the thick neck, the hands with their spatulate fingers, the face where two little grey eyes almost disappeared between their swollen lids—was brick-coloured and streaked with

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

prickly heat. Piéchard lived permanently on the edge of apoplexy.

When I told him my reason for coming to San Carlos he looked at me silently for some time and then said:

"I was expecting you. They told me you were looking for Alvarez." There was another silence, during which his little grey eyes hardened slightly. "What do you want of him?"

Once more I had to tell my story of Haiti and the ex-convict I had met there one evening in a night-club. The Belgian seemed to relax.

"Alvarez works with me," he said. "I'll introduce you when he gets back—if that's all right with him."

An hour later, after the third drink, the Belgian became more confidential. He, too, had begun by shark-fishing, and he, too, had been struck by the reserved manner of the Indian fishermen which had so puzzled me. This was ten years before, when Piéchard came here from Colombia.

He had come to San Carlos for the sake of the fresh-water sharks, which, from what he could learn in Managua, were never caught, and he had set up a small factory on the shore. A Chinese merchant in Bluefields, on the Atlantic coast, had promised to buy all the fins.

His difficulties began when he tried to hire fishermen. Most of the lake fishermen were Indians, and Indians refused to catch sharks. According to an ancient belief, shared by all the Indian races of Nicaragua, the shark is a beneficent creature and must not be attacked. To this day some Indians practise a shark-cult, as did the Kanakas of the Hawaiian islands, who used to worship Kamo-Hoa-Li, the king shark: an enormous creature which no one had ever seen, but which was said to have the power of guiding fishermen who had been lost in a storm. His

EARTHQUAKES AND DESERTIONS

help was invoked by lighting a fire on board and calling him aloud, and by pouring into the water the juice of a local plant, the *awa*. Kamo-Hoa-Li never appeared in person, but appointed one of his subjects to serve as pilot to the lost fisherman.

The Indians of San Carlos did not go as far as to hope for any help from the sharks, but the idea of fishing for them made them roll their eyes in horror.

The Belgian spent a fortune on bottles of guaro and various other presents, to induce about ten men to forget this legend. Two months later he had about four boats' crews working for him.

The sale of the fins alone was enough to ensure the success of this little enterprise. The Chinese of Bluefields and their fellow-countrymen with whom he traded found them of better quality than those of the sea-shark. For six months all went well. Then one morning, as the last boat reached the shore, the earth began to tremble.

There was nothing surprising in this. In Nicaragua seismic shocks are registered at almost every change of season; lamps sway and the ground rumbles, but after a few minutes things are usually back to normal. But that year, as luck would have it, the shock was exceptionally violent. The earth-tremors continued for some hours and the lake waters rose.

Needless to say, the fishermen found their own explanation of this sudden fury of the elements, and they deserted in a body, without even claiming their week's pay.

More rolls of *cordobas* were transmuted into alcohol and knick-knacks, but in vain: not a single Indian would return to work. Piécharde left the fishery for the Atlantic coast in the hope of recruiting fresh labour; he was on the point of returning to San Carlos without having been able

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

to persuade a single man to emigrate to the lake shore when he met Alvarez, who had just come back from Bluefields.

"I told him my story," said Louis Piéchard. "Shark-fishing interested him, and he agreed to come and work for me when the fishery started up again. A month later seven Indians were again fishing for me."

Towards noon next day when I arrived at the fishery with Louis Piéchard, the motor-launch which carried the catch to San Carlos every day was just casting off with its cargo of shark meat. The men had finished their morning's work. Some were asleep in their boats, others were day-dreaming with staring eyes in the rare patches of shade thrown by the walls of the sheds. There was no need to go up and smell them to discover the reason for those empty stares and corpse-like attitudes, which were more than weariness, slumber, and heat could account for. Marijuana was doing its share. It was thanks to marijuana that Alvarez had succeeded where Piéchard, with all his *cordobas* and trinkets, had failed.

But marijuana was not the only strange feature of this fishery.

In the course of the following days I discovered that the two open sheds where the sharks were cut up, the platform where the skins were laid to dry, and the shack in which an ageless mulatto woman cooked the men's food were as completely isolated from the neighbouring villages as if the boundaries had been marked by concrete walls. No Indian came near, except for the nine, whom others of their race must have regarded as outcasts.

They lived there from year's end to year's end, only leaving the place two or three times a month to go and gamble in San Carlos with what money they had left after

THE GUARDIAN OF THE MINE

buying marijuana. Piéchard paid them according to their catch, and shark was so plentiful in that part of the lake that in a good week they earned a considerable amount.

One evening when I was out on the lake with Piéchard some hundreds of yards from the shore, the Belgian suddenly pointed to a spot on the water a few cable's-lengths ahead.

Within a radius of hundreds of yards from that point, he told me, no Indian would cast a line; this again was because of a legend that had been handed down for generations among the lakeside villages. This area of grey water was said to be the domain of a shark of exceptional size. Some old Indians vowed they had seen it, but, of course, no one had tried to catch it. Woe betide anyone who tried, for by tradition this prehistoric monster was the guardian of a fabulous emerald-mine which must remain undisturbed at the bottom of the lake.

It was said that about twenty years before, some Indians had defied the ban and tried to penetrate the secret of this mine, which would have brought wealth to the whole country. About fifteen of them put out in boats, and when they arrived above the site of the mine, at a point where the depth was reputed to be hardly more than eleven fathoms, the bravest of them dived. But they could not reach the bottom and had to return to their villages empty-handed. Within the next three weeks all were dead, probably poisoned. The story ran all round the country. A year later an expedition set out from Managua to look into this mine story. Soundings were taken, and it was found that the depth of the water here was fifteen or twenty times as much as had been supposed. The emerald-seekers departed in disgust.

"They're all alive still, of course," Piéchard ended.

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

"And yet even the least superstitious of my men would rather be cut in pieces than fish there."

Alvarez returned from his trip some days later, a day after I had returned to San Carlo, my back aching from nights spent lying on boards and wrapped in Nicaraguan flags—of which a supply had mysteriously landed there—by way of sheets. It was the ex-convict himself who knocked at my door.

I found it hard to convince myself that this broad, grey-haired man was an old lag; he looked more like a placid farmer. He wore jeans and a check shirt and carried a broad-brimmed hat. He held out a thick hand, while the friendliest smile overspread his round, terra-cotta face. When I mentioned the name of his fellow-prisoner he showed no surprise and not a muscle of his face moved. He maintained the same serene smile, waiting for me to finish explaining why I had come looking for him; but before I had ended I was quite certain of one thing: behind his innocent mask the man was watching me closely. Something icy in that look gave the lie to his general appearance. He wouldn't be leaving San Carlos for some days, he said, and would be glad to see me again. But I felt that he didn't mean it. We met several times in the next few days, chiefly in shops where he was laying in stores for his next expedition; and although he never made me feel that he was trying to avoid me, yet at the same time he seemed not to be seeking my company, and his air was one of polite coldness.

"He's afraid of being asked questions," Piéchard explained. "He's always been afraid of that."

I never knew Alvarez' real name or the reason for his prison sentence, but a few days before he left on the trip I asked him to take me with him and he seemed quite willing.

SHARKS IN MY BLOOD

I spent those last days fishing in the lake, from a boat lent me by Louis Piéchar. He and Alvarez took it in turns to come out with me.

How long was it since that November afternoon in Corunna harbour, when I watched the load of emigrants embarking for the Caribbean? A few months only, and yet it seemed infinitely remote. I had studied all the different methods of shark-fishing, and my tour had convinced me of one thing: the sport thrilled me as passionately now as on the first night I tried it, off Cojimar.

On Lake Nicaragua it was all the more interesting because the sharks we were after were very big and even more voracious than those of the sea.

Late one afternoon, just after we had come ashore, Alvarez asked me home with him for the first time. His house, which was on the San Juan estuary, stood opposite a wooden wharf at the end of which his boat the *Lucitrón* was moored. We spent two hours loading her with the merchandise he intended to sell to the Indians: a heap of miscellaneous things—boxes of salt, mirrors, shoes, fish-hooks, lines, fabrics, sacks of fertiliser, and ornaments. At daybreak next day the *Lucitrón* cast off. There were three of us aboard: Alvarez, a Nicaraguan of about thirty who acted as assistant and bodyguard, and myself. An hour after sunrise we were off the Solentiname islands, where about fifteen farmers, cut off from the rest of the world, grow vegetables to supply San Carlos and its neighbourhood: chiefly rice, *yuca*, and black beans. As some lakeside villages pay for these in gold dust, the farmers of Solentiname are the richest in Nicaragua. Some of them have never left the islands in their lives. What becomes of their money? No one knows, but it is said in San Carlos that

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

fabulous fortunes, built up through generations, are buried under every farm.

At eleven o'clock Alvarez stopped the boat and took two lines from a locker. We were not after shark now but our lunch, and we caught it in exactly three minutes. The hooks had only sunk a few feet below the surface when the lines suddenly went taut; it was like angling in a preserve. A dozen fish each weighing a few pounds, of kinds I now saw for the first time, fell one after the other into the bottom of the *Lucitrón*.

The Nicaraguan chose two of the biggest—two blackish-grey ones with yellow-striped bellies—and threw the rest to the sharks. He gutted them and skinned them, and then hung them over a sort of metal basin containing charcoal. As soon as the cooking began Alvarez started up the boat again, to enable us to breathe. In spite of the awning stretched over our heads, I felt when we stopped as if I were swallowing fire.

Lunch over, Alvarez lit a cigarette and lay down in the bottom of the boat. And there he stayed until the evening, his eyes half-closed, day-dreaming and smoking cigarette after cigarette. The stifling heat that made me unwilling even to talk seemed to have no effect on him or his mate.

As we travelled north, the sticky air seemed to get heavier and more humid. We moved along only a few yards from shore. Green insects twice the size of dragon-flies, and great purple butterflies, fluttered above the lake; huge bubbles ran up to burst on the surface, from which mauve vapours arose.

About an hour after the sun had disappeared behind the mountains, the *Lucitrón* touched the shore for the first time. Ten or a dozen men were awaiting us on the bank: the first of the Indians that Alvarez was to visit. They

A RE-ASSEMBLED CORPSE

were neither tattooed nor befeathered; they looked like Piéchard's men and like many of the inhabitants of San Carlos. The same square heads and slanting eyes, the same garments of patched cotton and the same broad-brimmed hats. Their village could be seen through the trees that came down to the water.

Throughout the trip the scene was always more or less the same: a collection of wooden cabins, a few cement buildings, women in brightly coloured stuffs, and, beyond the dwellings, an area—usually small—of cultivated fields. Surrounding all, the bush.

Seeing these villages cut off from the rest of the world, one might well wonder where the Indians got the bank-notes with which they paid Alvarez for his merchandise. In fact, many of them went off every day to work in the mines or forests of the interior.

The lumbermen carted the logs to the shores of the lake, rolled them into the water, and lashed them together, and then convoyed the great rafts to San Carlos, poling themselves along like gondoliers.

One village we called at had been the scene of a grim drama about six months before. An Indian had rolled some logs into the water and was lashing them together when he lost his balance and fell in. A shark bit off his leg, and by the time the wretched man had been brought ashore he had lost three-quarters of his blood. He died a few hours later, while the shark continued to hover near the scene. A second Indian dived, attacked the shark with a knife, and succeeded in killing it with only slight injury to himself.

"Then," said Alvarez, "they opened up the shark's stomach, took out the Indian's leg almost intact and buried it beside his body."

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

The village that marked the end of our trip was situated on a rocky slope a mile or two inland. When we tied up at the point nearest to it we had been away from San Carlos for rather more than five days, and most of our stock was still unsold.

We were to stay here three days, going back to sleep on board at night, except for the Nicaraguan, who always slept with the Indians. It was on one of these evenings that the ex-convict told me his real reason for staying in this part of the world. The afternoon had been spent in selling the last of the stock, and for the first time I had seen Alvarez paid not in *cordobas* but in gold. The old man who handed him the little transparent bag of nuggets was the chief of some thirty Indians who had settled at this point on the lake. This tribe did not live in wooden cabins but in huts built of stone and beaten earth, in which two large openings were made opposite each other, as is usual in the tropics, to create a permanent through-draught. The headman lived apart, in a most surprising house: a proper white villa, as out of place in this landscape as a radio-mast in a documentary film on the Stone Age.

Architect and masons had come from Managua to build it. Alvarez himself brought the—somewhat scanty—furniture from San Carlos, also the enormous electric fan that was installed in the middle of the largest room. As he was unable to bring electricity at the same time, a mechanic had to be fetched from Costa Rica to fix up a complicated arrangement of pulleys and gear-wheels by which the fan could be worked. During the hottest part of the day, young boys from the village took turns at sitting on the seat provided and pedalling diligently away on bicycle pedals to keep the fan moving.



SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

All this represented a little mountain of nuggets. But nuggets were plentiful enough. One had only to look at the fabrics and jewellery with which the women were adorned to see that this village was very different from the rest.

These descendants of the Sumo Indians did not even till the soil. They had no scruples about fishing for shark—but why should they bother? Gold brought them everything they wanted.

It was about gold that Alvarez made up his mind to talk to me that evening. Was it because he had rather overdone the rum that afternoon, during his palaver with the Indians, or because he felt we knew each other well enough by now for him to speak more freely? As I listened to him I could hardly recognise the fat, placid man of the preceding days. His permanent smile had gone and there was a strange glow in his eyes.

From his place in the stern of the *Lucitrón* he gazed intently at the shore, and with a movement of his hand he indicated the village, where one by one the lights were going out.

"Five years ago," he said, "those people were like the rest. No villa, no nuggets, nothing. Raggamuffins. Then they found gold. We don't know who discovered the mine; probably the old man. Since then they've all lived on it. Of course they haven't declared it—which proves two things: one, that they're not such fools as they look, since they know the government might cheat them, and two, that it must be very well camouflaged.

"People have tried to find it, naturally. They've come from San Carlos and Managua to explore the hills. The Indians let them do it every time. And every time the prospectors went away empty-handed. It might

THE BEACH OF THE DEAD

be different if the government interfered, but for the moment . . .”

He was silent. After a moment, hitting the edge of the boat gently with his open hand, he added:

“So that’s how it is. I’ve decided not to leave the country until I’ve got my hands on that treasure. I don’t know how I shall do it; I’m trying to work something out. If there is a way I shall find it.”

When Alvarez lay down to sleep that night, my watch showed that it was after two o’clock. For two hours the ex-convict had sat in the same position, nervously clasping and unclasping his hands and smoking silently, his eyes riveted to the shore.

When I woke with the first rays of the sun he had been up for a long time and was talking to his assistant, who had just come aboard. It was time to leave for San Carlos.

For this strange convict-pedlar it was just the end of a trip; for me it was the end of my travels. The two Germans who had brought me to San Carlos must already be waiting to take me back to Managua, where I was to catch the plane for New York and Paris.

We had been travelling along our return route for some time when we came in sight of the cove: a sort of tiny fjord penetrating the land for about twenty yards or so. It was the *playa de los muertos*, the beach of the dead. The name dated from the time when the Indians of these parts, according to a now obsolete custom, threw their dead to the sharks. The water there was unexpectedly clear and very deep.

I was now to hear the last and most extraordinary shark-fishing story of my whole journey.

“Nobody knows just when it happened,” said Alvarez. “About thirty years ago, I believe. The chap who built

SHARKS ARE CAUGHT AT NIGHT

this house was a Dutchman, and he came here for one thing: to catch sharks. But not ordinary sharks. He wanted the ones that fed on the corpses which the Indians threw into the water; they were thrown in wearing all their jewellery, so you can see why. As soon as the ceremony was over, the Dutchman cast his lines in order to recover the gold and emeralds from the sharks' stomachs. It was a mad idea, because, after all, there's more than one shark in the lake. All the same, they say he made a tremendous pile. Between burials he used to throw in the bodies of animals he killed in the mountains, hoping that the same sharks would come into the creek for this bait too. Then one day the Indians discovered what the fellow was up to. . . ."

Alvarez cast his eyes round the horizon and added:

"So then they set fire to the house. And cut the Dutchman's throat."

